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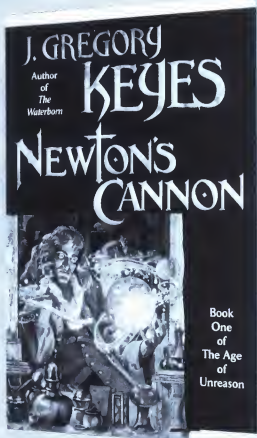
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# Survey Responses; Lesson One.

WELL, THIS HAS BEEN ENORMOUSLY enlightening and useful. I'm deeply grateful to all of you who so thoughtfully and kindly responded to my cry for guidance. I've been getting replies for about three weeks as I write this, and to date I've received some 70 E-mail and 50 snail mail responses. You've given me and my publishing colleagues a great deal to think about and, as I said last issue, your responses could quite well influence the kinds of books you see on the shelves over the next few years.

First, some overviews. The most common reply, by far, to my question of "Why do you prefer fantasy to science fiction?" was: Science fiction has gotten hard and cold and dystopic. When it first came on the scene, SF was the literature of hope—we could conquer the stars, have grand adventures, see new and miraculous things, and the universe was, by god, our oyster. No more. The vast majority of you seem to feel that present-day SF is a literature of despair. The future looks bleak and cold and decidedly unpleasant, as do its heroes and antiheroes. Many of you compared and contrasted the SF tropes of domed cities under cold, airless alien skies, and metal spaceships, and dark future cities filled with cyber-jacked skinheads with the warm, inviting glades of fantasy literature where Good and Evil wear easily distinguishable faces and unicorns gambol in the forest. The fantasy heroes and heroines are nice people, people you identify with and want to spend more time with. (Thus the 16-book series.) SF heroes and heroines, you feel, are by and large unidentifiable as such.

Your second most common reply derives directly from the first, I think. You also complain that SF is too "real." We are living in a science fiction world, with cloning and space travel and faxes and computers and cell phones, and most you don't want to read any more about it. When you read, you read for escape, not immersion. I say this derives from the first reply because, to a great extent, the science fiction world we're living in has not turned out to be the utopia we'd once expected, and it becomes harder and harder for the SF writer to return to the "literature of hope."

A third common theme was that SF today is just plain "too hard." Again, this relates back to points one and two. Since SF is no

longer a literature of hope, and because we're living in a highly technological world, your average SF writer has to delve deeper and deeper into the minutia of technology in order to come up with the next Cool Idea for the Future. In return you seem to be saying, "We're not rocket scientists, and we can't digest the data dumps on nanotechnology, cyberspace, artificial intelligence, celestial mechanics, and whatnot that you're trying to feed us. And when the key to understanding the whole book depends on us understanding advanced science—well, forget it. We aren't reading in order to be made to feel stupid. For that matter, we aren't reading in order to get smarter—we're reading for fun, entertainment, and escape, and maybe, if you insist, a little enlightenment, and SF writers, you're just not giving it to us."

But wait, there's more! This brings me to the next most common complaint—that SF has largely given up on the idea of characters in favor of the idea of, well, The Idea. The characters in SF seem to exist, you say, mainly to move The Idea around, and don't seem to have any distinguishing features that would make you want to spend time with them. Many of you, male and female alike, seem particularly peeved that there's precious little humor or romance in SF. There's sex and sarcasm, sure, but no laughter and no love.

I'm going to write more on the survey results next issue, because while these were the four main points made by most of you, others offered some extremely interesting, though slightly less popular, opinions. For now, though, I'd like to say that, from my admittedly skewed point of view (as a professional in the field for over 20 years, my tastes and opinions have been colored by the people I've met, books I've read, and trends I've seen come and go), I think many of you may be overgeneralizing. Sure, a lot of SF is dystopic, hard-edged, difficult, and generally unfriendly, but there is also much that is not. If you don't like high-tech books, there are many that offer far softer sciences, dealing with psychology, sociology, anthropology, and more, all of which can offer you experiences that you just won't find reading only fantasy. (Said the fantasy Editor as she shot herself in the foot!) More next issue, and thanks again. ♣

Shawna McCarthy

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Dear Ms. McCarthy:

I would first like to say that I am truly grateful for your magazine. The artwork, fiction, articles, reviews, and Editorials are the finest offered in this genre. Unfortunately, I have a difficult time trying to explain to my friends and family what it is I love about fantasy. That is why I am asking you. What IS "IT" about this form of fiction?

I know that when I read fantasy, I love where I am. I feel involved and consumed by the battles, the chase, the magic, the chill of evil, and the brilliance of victory. It just seems, in my humble opinion, that fantasy does a much better job of eliciting this response in me than anything else I read. Can you help me to explain these feelings to my skeptical friends, et al? When I try to explain I find myself confronted with some sort of terrible language barrier.

Taevan H. Black  
Lake City, Florida

*It can be frustrating to try and share something you care about with friends and family, only to have them scoff. If it is any consolation, and the extraordinary response that Realms receives from its readers and writers is any indication (just ask the local post office that handles the mail for our editorial offices) you are certainly not alone in your affection for fantasy. Also, fantasy requires a lot of imagination - a gift not everyone is blessed with. So hold onto your passion for fantasy and the written word without worrying what other people might think of it.*

Dear Shawna:

Congratulations on your 20 years in the fantasy and science fiction "industry." I have long believed that you are one of the most talented editors in the field, and your tenure at Realms - easily the finest fantasy-exclusive magazine in the world - confirms this. As a scientist/engineer who has worked in the aerospace industry for longer than 20 years, and who depends on fantasy and science fiction to keep from being crushed by narrow definitions of "reality," I tend to agree with your editorials on the production, dissemination, and interpretation of fantasy literature.

But "industry" is a bit grandiose for this pair of feuding sub-genres, given that total book and magazine business (let alone the uneven slice in question) can reasonably be viewed a small fraction of the Paper and Paper pulp industry. Books and magazines combined are roughly in the scale of paper bags/sacks/totes. In terms of revenues and profits, Fantasy and Science Fiction is dwarfed by toilet paper.

In your February 1998 Editorial (Vol. 4, No.

3), you give an interesting summary of the facts that result from giant corporate conglomerates treating your "industry" as if it were no more than a small corner of an industry, rather than something infinitely more precious to human beings. Writers' legitimate fears of the consequences if their "last book tanked" have led to self-censorship, the most insidious form of censorship, in which writers handcuff themselves to pre-empt punishment by the state or the market.

By the way, I loved *Lost Girls* by the ever-impressive Jane Yolen, but was distracted and disconcerted by 12 typographical errors. Usually Debbie Molis, Patricia A. Allen, Leanne Seddon-Trojan, and Carole R. Pascoe are very professional copy editors. In my industry, this would be seen as a quality control issue, blamed on both software and any manager under political attack.

By the time you have doubled your expertise to 40 years in Fantasy and Science Fiction, my industry might have a thriving colony on Mars; but the Martians will still be reading William Shakespeare, J.R.R. Tolkien, Sir Arthur C. Clarke, Jane Yolen, and the like.

Jonathan Vos Post  
Altadena, California

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

I am afraid there has been some miscommunication between us. Although I am, in part, to blame due to the poor diction of my last letter; it was quickly written and poorly thought out. However, your comment concerning which church I attend was grossly inappropriate and insulting. I felt it was cruel and uncalled for. The point I was trying to make, which you obviously missed, is that your magazine is misleading in certain respects. The word "Realms" in your title suggests multiple worlds of fantasy, worlds different from our own. Most of the stories I have read thus far are more like episodes of *Ripley's Believe It or Not*. Also the cover art of every magazine shows dragons or warriors with swords and I have never read such a story within your pages. I have discovered you are not the magazine for me. Frankly, you cannot focus on one facet of fantasy and ignore the other. You must play both sides of the fence. You cannot claim to be strictly a fantasy magazine without including all types of fantasy. I would like to emphasize, once again, real world religions are not fantasy to those who believe in them. Due to the reasons mentioned above I have allowed my subscription to run out. Also, send me your writer's guidelines if possible, perhaps I can help you to understand.

Ryan Kent  
Amherst, New York

*I see, you do not want to read the magazine, you'd just like to write for it. Apparently my reply to your letter regarding Robert Silverberg's wonderful story, The Church at Monte Saturno has been misunderstood. The question "What church do you attend?" was not actually a question I wanted an answer to. "Ha ha" - it was a joke as in wondering if the paintings in your church come alive, because you claimed the story was devoid of any fantasy and was too realistic for your taste. Wow, jokes really aren't funny when you have to explain them. Apologies if you imagined I was insulting you.*

Dear ROF:

You know I truly love your magazine and find the fiction to be of a very high caliber. Works by Jane Yolen, Robert Silverberg, and Tanith Lee are a real treat to find in a magazine. That is just to name a few. And that is not to say the other writers are not wonderful, because they are. Writers I am just discovering through your magazine alone, like Bill Eakin and Pat York are great "reads" as well. In any case, I do have a bone to pick, of sorts and for what its worth. I think you would attract a larger audience if you stopped putting so many dragons on your covers. The dragons are cute and all that - but lets face it, I am a grown woman walking around with a little bit of gray in my hair and more than a few wrinkles. I am just a wee bit embarrassed to be caught reading a publication with damsels in distress on the front cover. Oh well, doesn't mean I'll stop reading - just felt it was worth mentioning the covers don't always reflect the true interior literary content of ROF. Thanks for listening.

Theresa Gooding  
Punta Gorda, Florida

Dear Realms:

Thanks for the Gallery featuring the work of Richard Bober. His artwork is quite compelling and magical. I especially like *Col. Warthog's Tea Party*. Unfortunately my husband recycled the magazine a little earlier than I expected. I am wondering if you might let me know how I can receive further information about this artist.

Maryanne St. James  
Morristown, New Jersey

*You can contact: Jane Frank, Worlds of Wonder, P.O. Box 814, McLean, VA 22101. (703) 847-4251, e-mail: wovart1@erols.com this issue.*

*Your comments are welcome. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, Realms of Fantasy, P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, e-mail: s.mccarthy@genie.geis.com*



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## The new, the old, and the forgotten provide excitement and unexpected heroism.

WHEN I WAS A CALLOW YOUTH, AND CALLOW I CERTAINLY WAS, THE VAST BULK OF writers of science fiction firmly and fiercely maintained that a great divide existed between their literary genre and that of fantasy. A good many of these authors hated fantasy, nay, loathed it. You should have heard the way they said the very word back in those long ago days. You often knew when they were about to say it because their lips would curl in a highly visible, preparatory sneerl.

Pardon me, but as I wrote the above I could not help inadvertently and spontaneously creating what Lewis Carroll had Humpty Dumpty dub a *portmanteau* word, this one made up of "sneer" and "snarl," and I must admit I'm rather proud of it, though I'll probably hate myself in the morning. In any case, back to the review.

Having produced the sneerl they would ostentatiously gnash their teeth, which the sneerl had exposed, and then spit out the loathed word in deep, rolling tones with the relish of a true, bone-deep hater who is totally certain of the profound righteousness of his belief.

"Fantasy!"

Sometimes they would actually clench their fists as they said the awful word. Really. I do not exaggerate. Very often they would glare around them as if trying to ferret out whether or not there was a sympathizer or—God forbid!—actual practitioner of fantasy in their midst. I can recall a number of times attempting to maintain my cool under the intense ocular beam of various creators of legendary science fiction who are now firmly ensclosed in many a list of venerated golden oldies as I surreptitiously prayed to dark, Lovecraftian gods that the x-ray

survey would not penetrate deep enough to reveal the avid fantasy reader and collector carefully concealed underneath my disguise of mild-mannered cartoonist.

You can still encounter a few grizzled survivors of this school of thought muttering their way through the crowds in larger sci-fi conventions, but they have mostly died or changed their ways and their few younger replacements are lonely isolates.

Of course the obvious truth all along was, is, and will be that science fiction is fantasy, that there's no division at all, and therefore should be no quarrel. The difference between SF and other branches of fantasy is merely that the story told is based on some premise the author believes to be feasible, one that could become a reality if given the appropriate conditions. Following the same lines of reason one could argue that whereas a ghost story written by a skeptic should be classed under the larger, enfolding term of "fantasy", the same sort of spectral tale written by a believer in earth-bound survival after death by humans could legitimately be called "spiritualistic fiction." But let us fervently and passionately hope it never is.

One of the most charming things about science fiction is the gentle glow it takes on when it ages long enough to have a few or, in some cases, all of its "science" premises proved false or at least temporarily severely mislaid. This applies not only to stories but to all categories of science "imagineering."

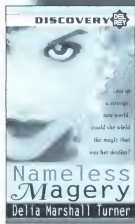
Is there anything more touching than old covers of *Popular Mechanics* showing accident-free commuters in their shiny little helicopters descending into and rising out from the spired jungle of Manhattan in a never-to-be 1970? And can anyone manage to fight back their tears as they gaze at those enthusiastic old newsreels that ecstatically show the New York World's Fair version of our planet-to-be covered with hundreds of car-crowded, multilaned highways that somehow manage to stretch dozens of layers deep into all directions without producing the slightest, tiniest whiff of pollution?

The vastness and enormous range of the amazing body of work left behind by Jules Verne ensured it would contain many such divinatory blunders, but it is in large part really remarkably accurate, and even today's readers will come across still-unrealized gadgets and sociological notions that seem very likely to take place just a

*Dragons and giants plague the hapless hero*  
Giles in Tolkien's  
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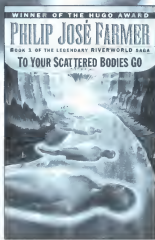


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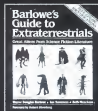
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little farther down our road.

The great joke about *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (Ballantine Books, New York, 222 pages, \$11.95) is that when Verne hopefully presented his finished manuscript it was so firmly and convincingly rejected for publication—on the grounds that the events presented in it could absolutely never happen under any conditions whatsoever—that Verne shuddered and hid it away in a trunk where it languished unread until his great-grandson came across the manuscript nearly a century and a half later.

Verne unveils a Paris he imagines existing in 1960, almost a century hence from the time he wrote the book. Due to the digging of a vast complex of huge canals the city has become one of the great seaports of the world, and this is gloriously symbolized by a Wonder-of-the-World, skyscraping lighthouse gorgeously illuminated by electric light bulbs and creepily located by Verne (in 1853) “only yards from where the Eiffel Tower went up in 1889,” as Eugen Weber points out in his excellent introduction.

I pause respectfully for your *frisson*.

The tone of the book is quite different from



the great novels that made this author's reputation. The bold and fearless scientists of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* are totally absent. The exhilarating feeling that man's intellectual triumph over Nature is altogether a jolly good thing is missing altogether. This is a bitter, mocking book about a scary, stupid future.

Far from being a larger-than-life, Captain Nemo-style adventurer, Verne's hero in this novel is a rather ineffective if sincere young

man whom we first see being mildly mocked by his fellow students for winning a prize (a factory manual) for Latin verse. Their hilarity springs from a mixture of amusement and contempt that anyone would bother to study, let alone show interest in, anything so blatantly impractical, unpragmatic, and financially unprofitable.

Art, or at least any art that is not frankly created for commercial purposes, is worse than scorned—it is not allowed to exist. Verne's most blatantly satiric assault on this aspect of his 1960's Paris is his creation of a positively diabolical institution: *Le Grand Entrepôt Dramatique*, or the Great Dramatic Warehouse. This is a vast establishment whose pathetic employees crank out the scripts for all the plays and other entertainments presented in every theater of the country. Michel's first interview with the director of the Warehouse sets the tone for everything to follow perfectly:

"I have as yet produced nothing."

"All the better—in our eyes, that is a virtue."

"But I have some new ideas."

## BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

*Pearls of Lutra* (A novel of Redwall), by Brian Jacques; Ace; paperback; \$5.99. Do not think for a minute the adventure is over! Here is the medieval world of Redwall Abbey—replete with fierce warriors; rousing adventure; evil emperors; and Tansy, a young hedgehog maid. Monitor lizards, rose-colored pearls, and riddles to solve are just a few of the fun and energetic pieces that put together this marvelous tale.

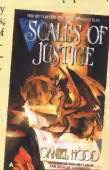
*Albion (The Last Companion)*, by Patrick McCormack, Raven Books, paperback; \$7.99. A skillful mix of history and Arthurian myth. This author's debut novel begins 10 years after King Arthur and most of his knights have died at the Battle of Camlann. One of the few survivors, a warrior called Budoc, waits for a peaceful death as a hermit, though the world around him is in tumultuous peril. Enter Irish pirates, the quest for a sovereign chalice, and a girl with magical powers. An exciting, original legend.

*Requiem*, by Graham Joyce; Tor Books; paperback; \$13.95. This is Graham Joyce's



first American publication, winner of the British Fantasy Award. Hailed as a dark fantasy of “miracles and madness.” Set in the holy city of Jerusalem, Tom Webster has traveled there after the death of his young wife. A mysterious work with elements of religion and trauma that will draw the reader in and astound! The Dead Sea Scrolls, the spirit of Mary Magdalene, and a man driven to the edge of sanity and resuscitated by his grief comprise this eloquent book. For fans of magic realism, fantasy, and thrillers alike.

*Walking the Labyrinth*, by Lisa Goldstein; Tor Books; paperback; \$12.95. A book of poetic imagery and enchantments with an engaging protagonist. Molly Travers discovers she is descended from a group of vaudeville magicians with ties to true occultists and real magic. In order to escape and survive a deadly “Order,” she must travel to England and walk the mysterious Labyrinth. “Coming-of-Age”



meets fantasy and the supernatural in this lyrical work by the award-winning author of “The Red Magician.”

*Thirty Strange Stories*, by H.G. Wells; Introduction by Stephen Jones, Carroll Graf; paperback; \$12.95. A must-have story collection by the author of such works as *The Invisible Man*, and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Wells published novels up until the time of his death in 1946, but these stories have lived on. His words still have the power to terrify and amaze. For all lovers of Wells' chilling fiction, and for new readers who's soon to become dedicated converts... read on...

*Scales of Justice*, by Daniel Hood; Ace; paperback; \$5.50. A thrilling read in continuing adventures from the author of Fanuilh, Wizard's Heir, and Beggar's Banquet. Featuring Liam Rhenford and his dragon familiar. Murdered wizards, a court that only tries crimes of magic, and the return of the dragon called Fanuilh are present within these pages. Beware dear reader, you are about to fall under the spell of a magical tale that you surely will be loathe to break! ♣



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"Of no use, Monsieur!"

Michel's career with the Warehouse is an extended failure from the start as he works his way down through the five major Divisions: (1) high and genre comedy; (2) historical and modern drama; (3) vaudeville; (4) opera and operetta; (5) reviews, pantomimes, and official occasions. Actually he quits before descending all the way down to opera and operetta, and—in case you hadn't noticed—tragedy had been prudently eliminated from the Divisions some time before his arrival.

The large strokes in Verne's vision of a future Paris (and world) are quite remarkably on target although, as in most science fiction, the timing is a wee tad off as his acerbic premonition applies, perhaps, a little more accurately to the 90's than the 60's, though I hazard a guess that it is not at all impossible to reasonably suspect they will find themselves reproduced in reality even more accurately come the next millennium.

The society of Paris in the Twentieth Century has invented, and depends with increasing slavishness upon, wide varieties of clever calculating devices. These machines and the gadgets that plug them together into a vast international informational web form the working foundation of enormous business associations and allows—if not inspires—they to grow more hugely powerful and increasingly impersonal regarding both their customers and employees with the passing of each new year.

All of this has generated great wealth for the fortunate few, but there is a growing and apparently insolvable (not that anyone seems to be making any serious attempt to be doing any solving) gap between them and an ever-larger global population of the wretchedly hopeless poor.

There seems to be no real point to the personal existences of population of Verne's imagined Paris, not even for the lucky well-to-do since, for all their wealth and power, their lives are blatantly devoid of any real goal or pleasure save to increase their holdings and their position of advantage over those less fortunate. Even worse, their interrelationships with family, friends, and business associates have become so shallow and empty of anything like real affection or even empathy as to be thoroughly meaningless and quite devoid of any sustaining emotional nourishment.

That certainly sounds familiar to me. Does it sound familiar to you?

On the lighter side, there is no end to the cornucopia of Verne's creativity as he free-wheelingly creates super tall buildings, then dreams up elevators to make them feasible; monstrous crowded megalopoli, then complicated public transportation ranging from subways to elevated trains in order to move their throngs of denizens smoothly from one exploitation to another.

Altogether a delicious, staggeringly brilliant literary extrapolation and a rich and

**The Refuge Of Night**  
by Mike Corvillo  
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by Mike Corvillo  
An elusive cult exists among us. Its members are immortal with superhuman strength, shape shifters, and live only by night—the perfect supernatural killing machines with amplified powers from practicing witchcraft. Their goal is to destroy civilization from within by dividing and conquering the Earth. Our most special agent, Dr. Lena Banks, returns and has everything to lose if she succeeds. Hell gave her all of the equipment to destroy life. The government gave her all of the skills of a professional assassin. All she lacks is the heart to use what she already has. She clashes head to head with the cult and her vampire master. When the cult finds her mortal family, the real terror begins. She will go as any length to save her kin. But will she violate her most sacred principle and kill? Does she have a heart of a killer?

This book also includes a bonus novella and an interview plus art gallery with Heather J. McKinney, the artist who brings us the new book of Lena Banks.

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worthy addition to the fabulous work that the wonderful Monsieur Verne has been kind enough to leave behind for our pleasure and our instruction.

I only wish it had turned out to be more of a fantasy.

*Dawn Song*, by Michael Marano (Tor Books, New York; 396 pages; \$24.95) is an extremely interesting and highly promising first novel which, the blurb on the cover of the Advanced Uncorrected Proof implies, has been inspired by the author's study of Alchemy and Kabbala.

It strikes me that it probably was inspired by just such studies, for its characters, both natural and supernatural, are ever in a state of transmutation and always moving along the limbs of the great tree of life from one illumination to another.

The heroine of the novel is a succubus that has been sent to Boston, of all places, to transform both the city and its citizens as a test of power.

The succubus, once a living sinner, then a lost soul in Hell, was carefully chosen from the general damned and taken under the intense personal care of the Unbowed One, Belial. This demon of great power gathered her up in order to mold her into a weapon for him to use in his coming contest against the Enfolded One.

The Enfolded One is the disgusting demon of filth and slime and mindless degradation that now rules Hell so cruelly that the damned are eternally mired in their damnation. He has also generated the battle against the great Increate into stalemate. Belial, burning with a reformer's zeal, is determined to displace him.

The author, Michael Marano, has created a very human bunch of humans to become involved in this titanic contest of demons. As in the novels of Charles Williams or George MacDonald, they are purposely widely varied to demonstrate the wide-ranging challenges and effects such a mighty encounter would produce. Some are burned away almost at once, some degenerate, some evolve, only a few endure.

One of my favorite characters is Dutch, a gentle street person, very ill (spiders in his lungs which he constantly tries to cough up and out) and in almost every other way vulnerable, but affectionate of life for all the cruelties it's dealt him.

An aspect of him which is stressed is one that I've often noticed and been very moved by in sidewalk dwellers but that I've never seen even mentioned in fictional treatments before is the very touching quality of amazing *neatness* you so often see in these people who are so tragically reduced.

The tidy way they set themselves up to beg with their cups and carefully lettered signs placed just so. The heart-breakingly stylish way the women arrange their hats and rags. And no suburban lawn was ever tended more carefully than the boxes they place in doorways or under steps and neatly

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cover with weighted newspapers or plastic garbage bags opened and smoothly spread.

Of course, suburban lawns very much included, these carefully thought out defenses are absurdly fragile and easily blown away.

I was also taken by a young couple who worship Beliel with their young bodies and keep a little altar with a cast lead figure from a fantasy game serving as one of the idols. The young man must be careful to fix his long hair in a net under his hard hat (the time of the novel is—not incidentally—just prior to the Gulf War) and otherwise be careful not to appear too odd to his fellow workers.

The novel floats from one to another of these characters and many others as they become involved in the titanic struggle swirling about them. Some are destroyed, some die; some triumph over their weaknesses, some completely fail to do so. The reader is encouraged to feel compassion for them all and all their stories are, one way or another, very nicely instructive.

The whole book is an attempt to instruct and to help and wise enough to do it in a highly entertaining way. I will be curious to see what Mr. Marano does next with his *Alchemy* and his *Kabbala* and his *kindness*.

For those who are especially interested in classic ghost stories, The Ash Tree Press of England is bringing out a series of very limited editions of reprints of totally out of print

and almost impossible-to-locate anthologies of ghost stories by legendary and, sadly, most forgotten authors.

H. Russell Wakefield was, though admittedly uneven, one of the absolutely scariest writers ever when at the top of his form. Period. *Italicized*.

The Ash Tree Press brought out his first book of ghost stories, *They Return At Evening* a year or so back and now they have brought out the second, *Old Man's Beard* (Ash Tree Press, Pennyffordd, Chester, Great Britain; 146 pages; hardcover; 19 U.K. pounds). It is a severely limited edition of 400 copies so you're not likely to see it turn up on the shelves of any of the major book chains.

I got mine by ordering it from a local bookstore but what with the American dollar being a peso so far as the British pound is concerned and the little nibbles taken by what I suspect was a sizable quantity of greedy middle men, the thing set me back a very noticeable \$55, count 'em, fifty-five, bucks.

The only consolation (outside of finally getting hold of the collection which is, of course, the consolation) is that tracking down and paying for the original edition (lots of luck! I've never been able to do it) would doubtless cost you that much and likely more unless you got some astounding break.

There have been a number of collections of H.R.'s stuff brought out through the years and they are floating around for a deal less.

If you're lucky enough to spot one I suggest you grab it just to see what a really real expert with specters can do if he tries. **✶**

—Gahan Wilson

I know, book reviews are supposed to cover new books. They're supposed to tell us the latest, to help us decide, when we rush to that exciting "New Books" section in the bookstore, which ones to buy. Well, this time I'd like to tell you about an exciting old book to run out and buy. While perfectly nice new books are being published, a lot of wonderful old books are on bookstore shelves, books that have stood the test of time, delighting readers for years and years. Just by the laws of probability, with all the fantasy books published in the past one hundred years, it's likely that a number of them are better than the few books that happen to be coming out this month.

Every fantasy reader I know loves J.R.R. Tolkien. Many of them can quote lines from *The Lord of the Rings* by heart. Yet only a handful have read Tolkien's two brilliant novellas, *Smith of Wootton Major* and *Farmer Giles of Ham*, which are collected in one volume from Ballantine Books (NY; 160pp.; mass market paperback; \$4.99). These are not epics; great battles are not fought; the fate of the world is not at stake; yet they are stories I have read many times, that I cherish for the unique, deep pleasure they give me.

*Smith of Wootton Major* is the story of a

*Continued on page 85*

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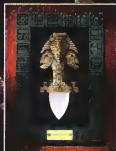
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## Casper Van Dien goes ape in Tarzan and the Lost City.

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Tarzan has captured the imagination of moviegoers since he was first committed to film in 1918. Since then, numerous movies and television shows have been based on the character. In 1984 Stanley

Canter produced (along with Hugh Hudson) one of the more successful entries: the lush *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes*, which starred Christopher Lambert and Andie MacDowell. It was the culmination of a twelve year effort to get the film made, and with the film's popularity, Canter began to plan a sequel. He acquired the sequel rights in 1991 and worked on the evolution of the story for the next six years.

Canter decided that since *Greystoke* had chronicled Tarzan's return to civilization, the sequel would see him returning to the jungles of Africa. "I structured the story," Cantersays, "on the action serials of the past, as I wanted to make a high adventure film with a really interesting love story. Even though the story takes place in 1913, our

Tarzan is more forward-looking and he is matched with a thoroughly modern Jane (played by Jane March) breaking with previous Janes. Ours is no wilting wallflower."

In *Tarzan and the Lost City*, Tarzan has a vision on the eve of his wedding to Jane. He sees the destruction of his childhood home at the hands of European soldiers of fortune, led by Nigel Raven (Steven Waddington), who seeks to discover and loot the legendary city of Opar. "They stole different things from different books," says Van Dien of the screenplay (written by Bayard Johnson and J. Anderson Black). "From about five different Tarzan books. I go back to stop [the mercenaries] from all the destruction they're doing as they try to find this lost

city this tribe protected, that I also protected, so that more people won't come in and it won't be like a gold rush. It's kind of like Indiana Jones meets Tarzan. It's a lot of fun."

Van Dien was cast for the title role on the strength of his reputation as a hard-working actor. Says Van Dien, "Steve Newman, my publicist, helped get me an article in *Movieline* magazine when I was doing *Starship Troopers*. So they filmed me and did an article on me and I talked about my work ethic, and the executive producer of *Tarzan*, Greg Coote over at Village Roadshow and Warner Bros., saw the article and saw the picture of me and said 'Who is this guy?' He called up Alan Marshall, the producer of *Starship Troopers*—they're friends—and they had a two- or three-hour conversation about me, my work ethic, what I worked like on the show and how I showed up early and worked out all the time and prepared beforehand. They hired me on the spot. They hadn't seen

Casper Van Dien, who starred in last year's *Starship Troopers*, now puts his stamp on the pop culture icon, Tarzan, Lord of the jungle.





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[*Starship Troopers*] because I did it before *Starship Troopers* was even done in post or anything."

It's rare to meet an actor who immerses himself in the literary source of a movie the way Van Dien does. "I read all 24 novels written by Edgar Rice Burroughs," he says, "beforehand and during, because I didn't have enough time to read them all because I was hired five days before they flew me out. In that five-day period I finished a film I was working on up in Vancouver, flew down to L.A., did a photo shoot for *Tarzan* on Saturday at the Edgar Rice Burroughs estate, then did looping for a movie of the week that same day, and did looping for *Starship Troopers* on Monday, and I flew out on Monday for Africa."

"I was gone for four-and-a-half months, and we shot for four months in South Africa, in Ramsgate and Margate and Bethlehem and Johannesburg, and it was amazing. Four months of me running around in the jungle, most of it with me in a loincloth. I was up at 2:30 in the morning, worked out really intense from three until five, and then I'd be on the set all day long for 12 to 14 hours a day, six days a week. It was really intense. I

also studied Jane Goodall tapes—she lived with the apes—so I learned ape movements and monkey sounds and stuff like that by watching her tapes. And they had some monkey specialists and ape specialists and animal trainers and I talked to all those guys.

I wrote over 500 pages of notes."

The actor's preparation didn't stop there. "I also watched a lot of the old movies. And I watched a lot of documentaries on it, and I got all the reading material I could get on it. I learned to speak a little Zulu while I was down in South Africa. I can speak conversational Zulu, because Tarzan spoke several different languages. Zulu wasn't one of them, I think—it's described as African dialects, but he was in Central Africa and since we were shooting in South Africa, and though there were some Central African people around, mostly it was Zulu, so it'd be easier for me to learn an African language if I spoke the one that was around me."

Ironically, Van Dien's rigorous workout schedule made it necessary that he do many of his own stunts in the film. "The two guys that were my stunt men wouldn't work out on this," Van Dien explains, "so my waist went all the way down to 29 inches for this, which is extremely skinny, especially for me. So I was really ripped up to shreds, but my stunt men wouldn't work out so they kept getting bigger waists, like 32 1/2 and 34 inch waists. In a loincloth, [they] really can't dou-

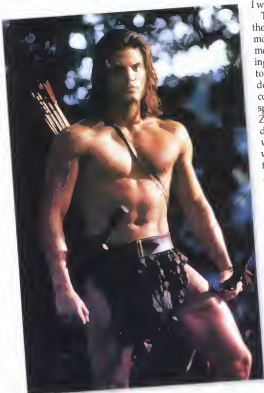
ble too much, I did most of my own stunts. They did some of them, like insane things they wouldn't let me do because of insurance reasons."

Van Dien's stunts included the famous vine-swinging sequences that are now a trademark of Tarzan movies. "I did a lot of the swings. I did some crossovers from vine to vine, which was cool. I'm pretty good at it, because I'm pretty strong for my size, so I was able to swing relatively easier than most people. But I was also riding the elephants and doing a lot of the animal work."

One sequence with a young elephant proved a bit more dangerous than Van Dien expected. "I got charged by an elephant. It was a big elephant, bigger than me, about a ton, so it had a little bit of weight advantage. I touched its head and it spun around and stuck its ears out and ducked and charged me, and he was right next to me so it wasn't a far charge. But it put its tusks right into my stomach and I grabbed on right at that time. It pushed me up four feet into the air and pushed me back four feet, put me down, and then put its ears out to charge again. I ran up a rock and they came and got it away from me. And then we went and shot the scene again. I had the biggest bruise, because its tusk, although it doesn't look like much, has a lot of power even though it's a little jab. If I throw someone a jab it's going to hurt them, and this little elephant threw me a jab with a



ABOVE: Van Dien did most of his own stunts for the film because of the difficulties in finding a body double. BELOW: Shot in South Africa, the impressively "buff" Van Dien was named "white Zulu" by the Zulu natives.



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ABOVE: This Tarzan's Jane actually is Jane — actress/model Jane March. BELOW: Actor Steven Waddington steps in as cutthroat treasure hunter Nigel Ravens.

pointed tusk—well, they're rounded off, but pointy enough. But I went on, afterward, and we kept shooting.

"Earlier on, I was riding the big elephant, one that was 14 feet tall, and they had a cameraman on riding behind me, and he was doing over-the-shoulder [shooting], and the bag slipped out from underneath him and all of a sudden the elephant didn't like this. And it started pushing his legs back and forth and we were shaking up there and the cameraman yells 'I'm falling!' and I reached back behind me and grabbed the camera, which is one of those

big huge cameras: They're not light. I pulled it up over my shoulder and I said, 'Hang on to me,' because I had a great foothold—I ride horses—so that was the time I felt most like Tarzan, because the producers and director came up to me afterward, and said 'Oh my god, thank you. You saved the camera. You saved the camera.' And the cameraman said, 'You saved my life.' I felt like Tarzan then."

Like a few previous Tarzans, Van Dien had monkey problems. "I got bit by the monkey, right on the chin," he says. "I had to get a tetanus shot. They just used it in the scene as



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though I had gotten a scratch."

The South African extras on the production were sufficiently impressed with Van Dien that they gave a few Zulu names. "Well, they called me White Zulu, but then they called me *Cipo*, which means gift. And then *Amandla*, which means strength. And then also *Imbubesi*, which means lion. They gave me some really cool names."

Tarzan wouldn't be Tarzan without Jane, played in *Tarzan and the Lost City* by Jane March. "She's only like, five feet tall, a real petite woman—I say petite in that French way because Tarzan also spoke French. So she makes me look like a Johnny Weismuller—I'm really tall next to her. They cast her first, so I guess it's a happy accident for me. I'm only five ten, and when I say five ten, it's like five nine and three-quarters. I'm not somebody who goes and says his height isn't what it is. I'm not one of those tall guys, although I'm taller than Christopher Lambert.

"Working with Jane, I only had a couple of scenes with her, when I was chasing after her, or the mercenaries are with her. She got captured by them, so she's got a lot of scenes with them. She comes to Africa to see me, and she has to deal with the mercenaries. She looks great in the movie and she comes across fine. I think she was great. She's [a] much stronger [character], not like 'Oh, help me, help me!' all the time.

"I heard somebody say, 'Hey, I hear you didn't get along with her, because you didn't hang out with her.' As soon as I'd get done with work, I'd go to sleep, and then I'd get up at two thirty in the morning and work out until five. Nobody else would do that. Usually when I'd be getting out at 2:30 in the morning, other people would be getting in. They would say, 'Why would you get up so early to go work out—you're insane.' And I kept saying, 'I'm in a loincloth in this movie for the rest of my life!' [laughs] So I didn't hang out with anybody, unfortunately. I was doing all this physical stuff and trying to make sure I kept myself stretched and worked out and in great shape so that I wouldn't get more injuries than I was already getting.

"I was getting injuries constantly. Running around in a loincloth and nothing else, I got cuts all over my feet—the bottoms of my feet were shredded and I got scars all over, because the jungle is sharp. There are branches, thorns, rocks—it's not like everyone thinks, with grass and everything like that. It's sharp. I have about 10 permanent scars from it, but they're very small now. I had burns on my feet from the ropes."

Despite the rigors, Van Dien loved the work. "I'm getting paid to be a kid," he says enthusiastically. "I'm playing Tarzan. I don't know any boy who didn't play Tarzan. When you get hurt as a kid, you get a bloody nose, and you just plug it up and say, 'Okay, I'm ready to play again.' And with this it was the same thing, I just loved it!" ♦



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## The King of Cats and Other Fabulous Felines.

A FRIEND OF MINE ONCE DREAMED THAT SHE WAS IN THROES OF GIVING BIRTH—NOT AN unusual dream for a woman to have, but in this case instead of a human child, she gave birth to a litter of kittens. “Were you frightened?” I asked. “Not at all,” she replied. “In fact, strange as it sounds, it was quite a lovely experience.” I thought of my friend when I read Laurie Kutchin’s poem “Birthdream,” published in *The New Yorker*: “This time I had given birth to a child with a remarkable tail. Part animal, part girl... I held her briefly in my arms, stroked her tail before we parted, her eyes nursing the dark moons....”

Startling as such dreams may be, they are rooted deep in mythology—for cats (both the wild *Felis sylvestris* and the domesticated *Felis catus*) have long been associated with childbirth, fertility, creativity, and magic. In many early cultures cats were animals sacred to the Great God-

vey of any random dozen fantasy writers and you’ll see what I mean.)

Pondering the association between writers and these elegant beasts, Joyce Carol Oates has noted: “We are mesmerized by the beautiful wild creatures who long ago chose to domesticate us, and who condescend to live with us, so wonderfully to their advantage; and, of course, to ours. My theory is that the writer senses a deep and profound kinship with the cat: *Felis sylvestris* in the well groomed furry cloak of *Felis catus*. The wildcat is the ‘real’ cat, the soul of the domestic cat; unknowable to human beings, he yet exists inside our household pets, who have long ago seduced us with their civilized ways. (Yes, and with their beauty, grace, and independence, willfulness—the model of what human beings should be.) The writer, like any artist, is inhabited by an unknowable and unpredictable core of being which, by custom, we designate the ‘imagination’ or ‘the unconscious’ (as if naming were equivalent to knowing, let alone controlling), and so in the accessibility of *Felis catus* we sense the secret, demonic, wholly inaccessible presence of *Felis sylvestris*. For like calls out to like, across even the abyss of species.”

According to an old legend, cats were the only creatures on Earth who were not made by God at the time of Creation. When God covered the world with water, and Noah set his ark afloat, the ark became infested with rats eating up the stores of food. Noah prayed for a miracle, and a pair of cats sprang to life from the mouths of the lion and lioness. They set to work, and quickly dispatched all the rats—but for the original two. As their reward, when the boat reached dry land the cats walked at the head of the great procession of Noah’s animals. Which is why, the legend concludes, all cats are proud, to this very day.

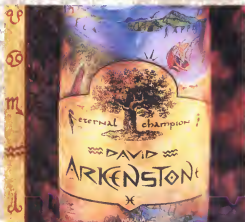
In the earliest feline images found on cave walls and carved out of stone, wildcats are companions and guardians to the Great Goddess—often flanking a mother goddess figure in the act of giving birth. Such imagery has been found in ancient sites across Europe, Africa, India, and the Middle East. In China the lion, Shih, is one of the four principal animal protectors—associated with rain, guardian of the dead and their living descendants. In the New World, evidence of wildcat cults is found across Central and South America, where



Edmund Dulac painted “The Queen of the Isles” and her extraordinary feline companion for Arabian Nights in 1907.

dess, revered for their beauty, intelligence, and independent ways. By medieval times, when the Goddess and women’s magic were seen in a sinister light, cats were believed to be witches’ familiars, shape-changers, and servants of Satan. Today, cats are still connected with “magic” and creative fertility in the stereotype of the cat-owning writer... particularly women writers, and particularly those in the fantasy field. (Just take a quick sur-

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the jaguar was the familiar of shamans and a powerful totemic animal. Ai apaec of the Mochica people of Peru was a much-revered feline god, pictured in the shape of a wrinkle-faced old man with long fangs and cat whiskers. A hauntingly beautiful wood carving of a kneeling figure with the head of a cat was found just off the Florida coast—remarkably well preserved, the image dates back over three thousand years.

We find the first evidence of *Felis tatus* in ancient Egypt, where the beasts were so sacred that any man who killed one was condemned to death. When a house-cat died, the entire family shaved its eyebrows as a sign of grief; and mummified cats (along with tiny mummified mice) have been found in Egyptian tombs. In the 1st century B.C., the Greek historian Diodorus reported the fate of a hapless Roman who'd caused the death of a cat. "The populace crowded to the house of the Roman who had committed the 'murder'; and neither the efforts of the magistrates sent by the King to protect him nor the universal fear inspired by the might of Rome could avail to save the man's life, though what he had done was admitted to be accidental. This is not an incident which I report from hearsay, but something I saw myself during my sojourn in Egypt." *Mau* was the Egyptian word for cat—both an imitation of its speech, and a mother-syllable. Bast, the



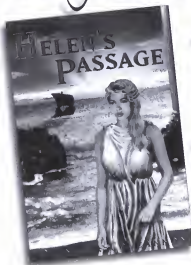
ABOVE: Arthur Rackham painted this *sly puss* in 1913 to illustrate the old Mother Goose rhyme "Hey! Diddle diddle!"

Cat-mother, was a Goddess whose cult began in the delta city of Bubastis and eventually covered all of Egypt with the rise of the XXII Dynasty. Unlike the fierce lion-headed Sekmet from earlier Egyptian myth, Bast embodied the benevolent aspects of cats: fertility, sexuality, love, and life-giving heat.

Bronzes from the period show the Goddess in her feline form (seated and wearing earrings), as well as in human form with the head of a cat, kittens at her feet. The twice-annual Festivals of Bast (as described by Herodotus) were carnivals of music, dancing, wine-drinking, love-making, and religious ecstasy—dedicated to Bast in her aspect as mistress of love and the sensual pleasures.

The medieval idea that the cat has nine lives (or that witches may turn into cats nine times) probably comes from the Ninefold Goddess, an element of Egyptian myth. Folklorist Katharine Briggs believed that the fearful beliefs surrounding cats throughout the Middle Ages indicates they were sacred animals to people of earlier religions, subsequently demonized by the spread of the Christian church. Cats were certainly sacred to Freyja, a goddess of beauty, fertility, and independent sexuality venerated across northern Europe, who traveled the world in a chariot drawn by magical cats. In the British Isles, cats alternated with the hare as the underworld's messenger, sacred to the Pictish and Celtic goddesses of the Moon. Numerous superstitions surround the cat—many of them contradictory. In certain areas of Europe and America, a black cat was considered unlucky; while in other areas black cats were believed to bring luck, and the white cat was feared. Welsh sailors believed

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that a ship-cat's cry portended stormy weather; other sailors believed a cat on board (or even to mention the name of a cat) would stir up the wrath of the sea. Cats born in May were melancholy; a cat in the cradle foretold a safe birth. In eastern Europe, a cat jumping over a coffin created vampires. Some people believed sleeping with a cat brought good luck and the Great Mother's protection; others believed that cats sucked the breath of the sleeper, causing illness or death. In China, the company of a cat warded off evil spirits and ghosts; while in France, cats would bring ghosts indoors if they were let in at night. In Indonesia, bathing a cat was one method of bringing on a rainstorm; in the American South, kicking a cat would bring rain—or rheumatism. The belief that cats can see ghosts, spirits, or fairies is found all over the world, and can be traced back at least as far as the Egyptians (who also believed cats stored sunlight in their eyes, using it to see at night). In the British Isles, cats were sometimes believed to be fairies in disguise, or in league with the fairies—watching mankind and reporting back to their masters. Fairies and ghosts can see through the eyes of cats in tales told all over the world—and conversely, to look deeply into the eyes of a cat is to see Faerieland.

Numerous legends tell of human beings who transform into the shape of a cat. Although some male wizards, magicians, and shamans were gifted with this power, more commonly the shape-shifter was a woman, and a witch. Cats (along with bats, owls, and toads) were believed to be witches' companions who carried messages to the Devil, and aiding with spell-casting. During the wide-spread witch trials of Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries (a holocaust in which millions of people, primarily women, were tortured and killed) cats were burned, hung by the neck, or drowned alongside their mistresses. A witch, it was said, would shape-shift into cat form whenever the Moon was full. Good men were advised to lay consecrated salt on their doorstep at this time, lest witches compell them out into the night to join in their revels. Many tales told of a man who shot a black cat in the paw, only to find the local witch with a bandage on her hand the next morning.

When we turn to traditional fairy tales, however (passed down primarily by women story-tellers), we find that shape-shifting cats generally have a far less sinister aspect. "The White Cat" is a popular tale that comes from 17th-century France, by Countess Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy. In this tale, the three sons of a king are sent upon a series of quests. The youngest son meets a lovely white cat—the queen of an enchanted castle filled cat-servants and courtiers. She helps the prince with his tasks, and over time he falls in love with her. In the end, she asks him to cut off her head; sadly, the young prince obeys her command. This breaks the spell, and the cat assumes her true shape as a human princess.

# New Poetry Contest \$48,000.00 in Prizes

*The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months*

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the brand new North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

## How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry  
Suite 17512  
1 Poetry Plaza  
Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282  
Or enter online at [www.poetry.com](http://www.poetry.com)

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

## Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound



Gordon Steele of Virginia, pictured above, is the latest Grand Prize Winner in The National Library of Poetry's North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. As the big winner, he was awarded \$1,000.00 in cash.

anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

## World's Largest Poetry Organization

Having awarded over \$150,000.00 in prizes to poets worldwide in recent years, The National Library of Poetry, founded in 1982 to promote the artistic accomplishments of contemporary poets, is the largest organization of its kind in the world. Anthologies published by the organization have featured poems by more than 100,000 poets.

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In "Kip the Enchanted Cat," from Russia, a mother cat and a kitten are actually mother-and-daughter under a fairy's curse. The kitten is raised with a princess, and eventually aids her with several magical tasks, leading to the spell's undoing... and a double wedding with two suitable princes. (This tale—about women's friendships—was a particular favorite of mine as a child.) "The Cat Bride" is a tale of animal-transformation in reverse: a house-cat becomes the bride of a good and gentle man who allows the gossip of neighbors to undermine his marital contentment. Jane Yolen includes a lovely re-telling of the tale in her picture book *Dream Weaver*; while Storm Constantine creates a sensual, thoroughly version of the cat bride story in "My Lady of the Hearth," in the erotic fantasy anthology *Sirens* (forthcoming in August). Angela Carter makes startling use of feline shape-shifting imagery in her dark re-telling of "The Tiger's Bride" (an animal bridegroom story and variant of "Beauty and the Beast") in her brilliant collection of adult fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*. "Silvershod" is the Russian tale of a poor man, a child, her beloved gray cat—and a magical deer that sheds jewels in the snow; Ellen Steiber's poignant long poem based upon "Silvershod" can be found in *The Armless Maiden*. Steiber re-tells another classic cat tale in her novella *The Cats of San Martino* (forthcoming in the anthology *Silver Birch, Blood Moon*), based on "The Colony of Cats," the Italian story of a poor girl who

becomes the servant in a household of cats at the wild edge of her village. (This tale lies at the root of the Italian saying "She's gone to go live with the cats," used to describe a girl who has run away from home.) The most clever fairy tale cat of all is not a human in cat-disguise, but a feline that walks and talks like a man: that bold rascal called *Puss in Boots*. The tale as we know it comes from the French version of Charles Perrault in the 17th century; in earlier versions (such as those of Straparola and Basile in Italy) Puss is just as wily, but hasn't yet taken to wearing his famous boots. In a Scandinavian version of the tale, called "Lord Peter," our plotting Puss is female, and turns out to be a human princess under the evil curse of a troll—bringing the story back into the shape-shifting tradition. (For a ribald adult re-telling of Puss in Boots, see Esther M. Friesner's wry story "Puss," published in the anthology *Snow White, Blood Red*.)

In addition to Puss in Boots and other clever rogues from old fairy tales, memorable cats can be found throughout English literature of the past hundred years. Who could forget the grinning Cheshire Cat met by Alice in Wonderland, or poor hungry Simpkin in Beatrix Potter's Christmas tale, *The Tailor of Gloucester*? Or Rudyard Kipling's "Cat Who Walks" by Himself stalking through the *Just So Stories*? Or Edward Lear's *Owl and the Pussy Cat*, setting to sea in their pea-green boat? Or T.S. Eliot's dashing

Growltiger in *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*? Or Mehitabel, friend to Archy the mouse, in the poems of Don Marquis?

Scottish author Nicholas Stuart Gray (writing in the 1950s and '60s) created some of the most memorable cats to be found in children's literature, in the fantasy tales *Grimbold's Other World*, *The Stone Cage*, and *Mainly in Moonlight*. Fritz Leiber's story "Space-Time for Springers" (published in 1958) is one of the great cat tales of all time, involving a teleporting kitten; while other classic science-fictional cats can be found in Robert A. Heinlein's *Magic Inc.*, Paul Anderson's *Operation Chaos*, and the books of Andre Norton. Other memorable cats include those prowling through Diana Wynne Jones's children's fantasy novel *The Lives of Christopher Chant*, Will Shetterly's adult fantasy novel *Cats Have No Lord*, and the multilingual beast in Jack Cadry's magical realist novel *The Off Season*.

If you'd like to know about cat lore and legends, Katharine Briggs is the standard authority; her book *Nine Lives: The Folklore of Cats* is both informative and entertaining. *Lady of the Beasts: The Goddess and Her Sacred Animals* by Buffie Johnson is a useful reference source, as is *Deer Dancer: The Shapeshifter Archetype in Story and Trance* by Michele Jamal (although be warned of the overly New Age slant of the latter volume). I highly recommend *The King of Cats and Other Feline Fairy Tales* edited by John Richard Stephens, an excellent book on the subject gathering both



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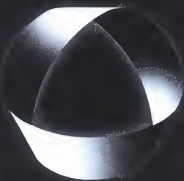
well- and lesser-known fairy-tale variants from around the world. *All Cats Go to Heaven* edited by Beth Brown (published in 1960 and a little hard to find) is a delightful collection of 50 cat tales by the likes of Lewis Carroll, Lafacadio Hearne, Karel Capek, Paul Gallico, Suki, Colette, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Lloyd Alexander. I also highly recommend *The Sophisticated Cat*, an anthology edited by Joyce Carol Oates and Daniel Halpern—a fat, treasure-house of a volume gathering a range of stories from writers like Anton Chekhov, Emile Zola, P.G. Wodehouse, Ernest Hemingway, and Damon Runyon to Angela Carter, Soseki Natsume, Alice Adams, and Ursula K. Le Guin—as well as poetry by Keats, Shelley, Yeats, Graves, Rilke, Neruda, and numerous others. The Japanese story *The Boy Who Drew Cats* is retold by Arthur A. Levine in a gorgeous picture-book version illustrated by the great French illustrator Frederic Clement. Ellen Steiber also makes use of this story (transplanted to England's mist-covered Dartmoor) in a magical tale for young readers called (by the publisher) "Fangs of Evil." T.S. Eliot's hilarious *Old Possum* poems are brilliantly illustrated by Errol Le Cain in the picture book *Grovelltiger's Last Stand and Other Poems* by T.S. Eliot.

*The Wild Road* by "Gabriel King" is a brand-new British fantasy novel about cats on an epic quest, filled with nuggets of cat folklore, told with a great deal of charm and wit by the talented team of Jane Johnson and M. John Harrison. (Check out the Web site for this book at [www.randomhouse.com/delrey/](http://www.randomhouse.com/delrey/).) I found the King novel more satisfying than Diane Duane's recent cat adventure, *The Book of Night With Moon* (complete with its own cat language and glossary)—but die-hard feline fans may want to check out this novel anyway (about cat-wizards casting spells in modern New York City). My favorite of all the "fabulous feline" books to cross my desk recently is an odd one: *Mrs. Chippy's Last Expedition: The Remarkable Journey of Shackleton's Polar-Bound Cat*, by Caroline Alexander. This bizarre little book purports to be the journal kept by Mrs. Chippy, the (male) cat on board the ship *Endurance* in its 1914 trip to Antarctica. The journal is introduced by another cat, Lord Mouser-Hunt, F.R.G.S., and comes complete with maps and photographs, all presented quite earnestly (albeit tongue-in-cheek). You'll find a whole herd (or is it pride?) of magical cats in *Catfantastic*, a four-volume anthology series edited by Andre Norton and Martin H. Greenberg. My own preference is for *Twists of the Tale*, an anthology of "cat horror" edited by Ellen Datlow—which I recommend even to those who don't usually like horror (or theme anthologies). It's a wonderful book of enchanting, spooky, unusual, and highly literate stories, edited by a woman whose own two cats clearly keep her on her toes.

The association of fantasy writers and cats is not new to this century. In 1817, Washing-

*Continued on page 85*

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they come crawling back again. Beware of the Mysteries of the Old Ones!

# MEETING THE MESSENGER

BY DON WEBB

Illustration by John Snyder

WHEN THE MATERIAL FIRST CAME ACROSS MY DESK I thought I smelled a hoax. When my part in the drama was over, and I had hidden the manuscript deep within the files and bureaucracy of the Ransom Rare Book Collection, I still catch a smell when I pass the third floor where the manuscript is locked away — the smell of cosmic fear the planets give off, knowing their end is sealed. I will likewise hide these words in my official papers, hoping against hope that someone wiser than I will know what to do.

My name is Niles Pryor. I am a paleographer, which means that I study the evolution of letters. My specialty is Egyptian and near-Eastern scripts, with particular emphasis on dating Arabic texts. As a consequence I don't discuss my work a great deal with neighbors or friends.

It was in early April, which in Austin, Texas is bluebonnet season and the sides of the highways turn a living royal blue, when my boss Dr. Alfred Rouin gave me the *Yellow Text*.

"We got an almost completely useless collection of late-19th century and early-20th century documents. It comes from a man who found it in his uncle's attic. He sent it all to us and we're going to put most of it in the annual book sale. Except for this. Any idea what it is?"

It was 19 pages of parchment closely lettered in an unknown script. The pages were in an old manila envelope that bore the following inscription.

*The Yellow Text of Thamos Kon  
"Contacting the Messenger"  
Only known example of Naath-R'unai text. Damascus (?)  
Eighth Century.*

"I'll give it a look," I said, "But Naath-R'unai doesn't sound like it would be at home in Damascus. And this lettering looks like nothing I've ever seen. Maybe Yezidi. Their writing looks Martian."

When the boss was gone, I E-mailed a colleague, Dr. Charles Akeley. Charly and I had done graduate work at the Oriental Institute in Chicago.

TO: 000005Akeley@ls.miskatonic.edu

Charly,

I'm gonna fax you some sample sheets. I expect it's code, but it looks like that Pacific stuff you like. Any ideas on the script's supposed name of Naath-R'unai? You know of anything interesting coming out of Damascus in the 8th century?

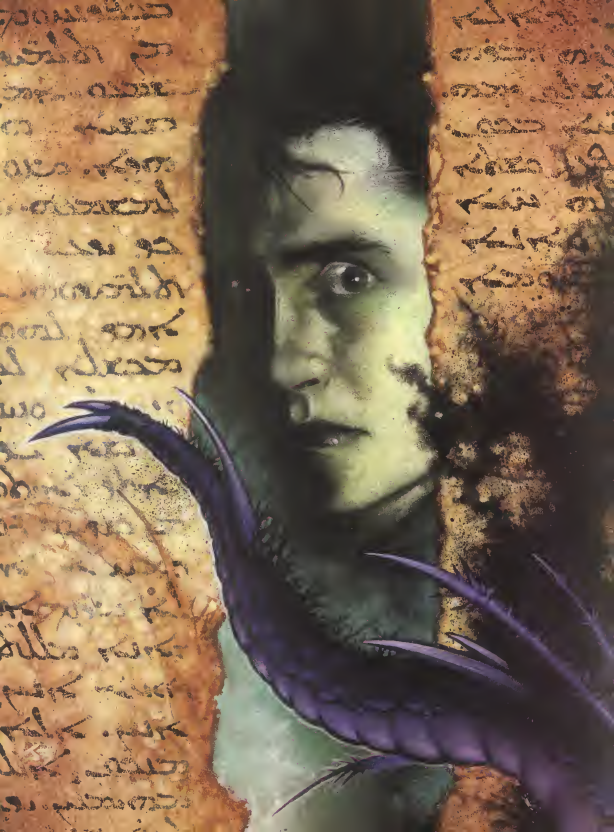
I'll buy you BBQ at the County Line if you come to the conference in October.

Best,  
N.

I faxed him the sample sheets and then spent a little time sketching out the letters to learn the distinctive elements. The 8th century was a great time for codes in the Islamic lands. The Hermeticists and Goeists were going underground since sorcery was a big-time crime in the eyes of the Prophet. The dark pre-Zoroastrian religions of Persia (which had withstood both Zoroaster and Christ) were finally being forced into hiding under the thought-killing ice of enforced monotheism.

Of course this could be some elaborate hoax that sold the papers to an old occultist.

I sketched. I began to muse. I began to dream a little dream. I seemed to be walking in a dusty square, past women in black shapeless garments, past camels garlanded with clanging brass bells, over all lay the long shadow of minarets. I was looking for something. Someone. Then I heard the bubbling of hookahs and I stepped into a tea shop. He was sitting in the corner, in the darkest part of the shop. His robe was of scarlet flame and he wore a strangely angled



pendant. He had the pale dark skin and fine features of a Persian. He looked up at me, and I felt myself drawn by his unusually large and clear eyes. I had never felt a gaze like this. I felt that he had measured me and now he pulled me to the table with the strength of his eyes.

"We have much work to do, Niles."

Suddenly I came back to myself. Decided I would go get a Coke. That low blood sugar Sally was always warning me about must be acting up.

The next day I got an E-mail from Charly.

TO: Niles@hrc.ut.edu

Re: Samples

Niles, I've never seen anything like it. There's a similarity to the Easter Island notation or the Mohenjo-daro script. We have a Greek translation of an 8th century Damascus text here called the *Neconomicon* which seems to be highly revered in somewhat unsavory occult circles, although your fragment maybe from the *Typhonian Tablet*, which seems to be the source document for the *Kitab Al Azif* or in bad Greek, the *Neconomicon*.

I hope to make it to Austin next year for the Maya thing.

Best,

Charles.

I sent some of the parchment off to the lab and began a symbol count. There were 28 letters. The justification of the text suggested a right-left, top-to-bottom read. I began a computer file and scanned in each letter. After four hours I could type on my keyboard and produce Naath-R'unai text. There was something hypnotic about the figures. I kept typing and watching my screen fill with the cryptic symbols. I wasn't getting any work done, and when the lab guy came in with his report, I tried to remember what I'd been doing.

The parchment wasn't anywhere near the 12 centuries of age attributed to it. Three hundred, perhaps four hundred years old. I called up my boss and asked if the nephew knew anything about how his uncle had got hold of the parchment.

He said the nephew said he didn't know anything about his uncle's collection. Giving it to the Humanities Research Center had been a whim — he had been going to put the stuff out for the garbage man.

"What you got on it?" he asked.

I said, "The script looks like Mohenjo-daro inscriptions, which would date it to about four thousand years ago, but the parchment works out to be three-four hundred years old tops. If it is an example of some sort of Pacific script it could be very significant, or it could be one of those *Time-Life* amazing mysteries."

"Oh lord. Look, don't spend any more time than you want on it." "I'm going to look at Javan Rejang script. I think we might be looking at a secret society cipher here."

"But in what language?"

"Only a few thousand to guess from."

I took the parchment home to work on it. The grass wanted mowing and the laundry was piled up — so I needed the parchment to keep me busy instead. I went out with Sally to Mother's, Austin's best vegetarian restaurant — and I blinked my big brown eyes and got her to volunteer to do my laundry. We went back to my house, kissed, had a little wine. Sally started sorting my clothes and I began playing around on my Mac.

Maybe it was the wine, or the hum of the dryer, but I drifted off in a reverie. It was the same dream as before, only a thousand times more intense. As I walked through the marketplace, I could feel the hot dust on my skin, smell the camels (and the ripening wheat in the fields beyond the city), I smelled the hashish and the strong coffee at the shop. I knew that I was dreaming, but I didn't want to wake up or even control the experience. I wanted to find out what would happen. I wanted to submit to The Unknown.

He smiled when he saw me. He had been busily writing on a parchment. He spoke to me in English; although I could clearly hear Arabic and Persian at the other tables.

"Ah, Niles, I hadn't expected you so soon. You must live a life of leisure that you can devote so much time to the mysteries."

He laughed and showed me his parchment. He had written the glyphs of the Naath-R'unai in neat columns with their phonetic equivalents in Arabic beside them. For two of the glyphs there were no equivalent Arabic signs; one was more or less a "z" sound for which he had used the appropriate Persian letter, the other was the "hissing H" of the Coptic alphabet.

My transition to waking was not clear. There was a lot of dizziness and readjusting of proportions. As I scratched down the phonetic equivalents on the back of my Southern Union gas bill, the letters kept changing size. Sometimes they were gigantic other times they seemed to slip between the molecules. I was feverish. I was pushing as hard as I could to get the letters down. I don't know how long Sally had been shouting at me.

"Hey, what's with you? Have you freaked out?"

I finished the last letter. "What?"

"Are you OK? You look like a car almost hit you or something. You alright?"

"I, eh, just had this huge flash of insight about this text I'm working on."

"Christ, you don't look so good. I'm sorry. I didn't you clearly when I came in. God, you should see yourself. Your eyes are the most bloodshot I've ever seen. You're pale, shaky, and wet. Lck. Do we need to get you to an emergency clinic?"

"No, really, I'm fine." I've loved Sally for two years, but all I wanted to do was get her out of my house and work out the text. She seemed alien and distracting to my true purpose.

"Where were you?"

"Oh, just lost in my mind."

"No," she said, "where were you a couple of minutes ago? I finished your laundry, you scum, and I was coming in for my good-girl reward. You weren't in the house."

"I, eh, went out for a walk. I thought I could jog my cognition and sure enough, "I motioned at the envelope.

"Yeah. Well, do I get my reward?" She started to unbutton her fly.

"No, I mean, I'm feeling really shaky. I'll give you a peck on the cheek and a rain check."

"You must be sick."

After a seeming eternity of my reassuring her that I would get to bed, not work so hard, take vitamins, — I was able to get her to leave. It was about midnight when I began transliterating the text.

I realized quite early on that the text was indeed in Arabic, and consulting von Winterfeldt's *Historical Arabic Grammar*, was able to place the writing in the period of the Omniade Caliphate. About 4:30 in the morning I had translated the first page.

*Having pried into this Mystery it claims you now for it opens in you a secret door to the place where Time is not. The creatures of angled time must abide for a season away from the World of Horrors but know that they have created a living gate whose name is curiosity. To those who seek after knowledge comes the Messenger, who is our soul and appears in the World of Horrors as a crawling chaos. Many are his forms as he whispers the nightmare secrets that draw us back to the World of Horrors in her unspeakable variety.*

I SLEPT MOST OF THE NEXT 24 HOURS, CALLING IN SICK WITH THE flu. The next day the security guard said I looked pretty shaky. Dr. Rouin came by. Usually I really like him and would have been touched by his solicitude, but it was all I could do to keep myself from throwing him out of my office. I posted a query on Usenet alt.soc.religion and alt.mythology asking if anyone had encountered the term "angular time."

I was well into translating the second of the pages when Dr. Rouin returned and asked if I'd like to have lunch with him. I realized that if I was to maintain myself while I translated the text I would need to keep my job, friends, and so on. etc. I told him I was sorry for my churlish display and we went off to Quackenbush's coffee house. As we walked in the bright spring air I seemed to become two peo-

ple at the same time. Part of me looked at the students in the protest shanty, the Ban Cars people at their desk, the evangelist Christians shouting toe-to-toe with the gay rights activist, the beautiful fountains and infamous clock tower of the UT campus with that seasonal delight of spring that gets everybody through the year. The other person in my head looked with seething contempt at all of these activities. All this repetition year after dreary year, decade after dreary decade, was slavery. These people were bound by the patterns. I longed to strangle one of the student activists with my bare hands. Not because I hated what he had to say, but because I wanted more than anything to bring some chaos to their lives.

This other person, this dark head inside mine, seemed to wane as I got farther and farther away from my office. By the end of our meal I had resolved to file away the *Yellow Text* and just put things aside — at least for a few months. Dr. Rouin told me that there was a new installation in the Comp Sci department — *Virtual Reality and Dimensional Tracings*. Said it sounded pretty neat and suggested we go by before we went back to work. I thought it would help clear the darkness from my head so I agreed.

The Comp Sci folk gave us each goggles and a Walkman. The goggles were hooked into a computer that revealed an imaginary landscape — a three-dimensional, color angular simulation of our own. The tape in the Walkman explained what was happening. First it explained *Flatland* to us — showing us how Mr. Sphere would look passing through Mr. Square's frame of reference. At first we could just hear him as he was above us. Then he was a point, then a series of expanding circles, then a series of diminishing circles and then a point — and then a haunting voice from beneath our frame of reference.

Then our tape mentor went on to explain that a four-dimensional structure would have a 3-D cross-section as it passed through our frame of reference. Mr. Hyper-Sphere hailed us from nowhere, then passed into a room as a ball that grew very large and then small.

The displays were quite impressive and we thanked the students. I asked one of them — a cute redhead who reminded me of Sally — what a nonsensical ultradimensional being would look like.

"Well it would probably appear quite chaotic — even monstrous."

"We talk about this being a three-dimensional world," I said, "but what if there are other dimensions? I mean, on the axis of height we have above and below — could we have an axis for good and evil or known and unknown?"

"That's a question for the philosophy students."

I got back to my office, put everything away, and worked on mundane tasks. I called Sally and told her I was feeling better.

I MANAGED NOT TO LOOK AT THE *YELLOW TEXT* FOR A COUPLE OF weeks; however, I never managed to file it. I told Dr. Rouin that it was a dead end.

Curiosity got the better of me and I decided I would at least finish my translation of the second page.

*Your world is bound by a ring of 12 divisions alternating between life and death. Our world is unbounded save by our nightmare will. Think of us and say the Words of Fear and we will come through you to lay bare your world which once and shall again belong to us. Thanos Kon is the messenger and his names are many. Nynalathotep is he, and Umr At-tamil is he, and Rla Fa Tla is he. Say the Words and Dreaming Chthulu will open the Mekhen gate to the dark and angled spaces. Say the words and you will meet the Messenger. Yk p't tha M'Khen l'ly-z-d'ayn V'g'br't'r N'yraj-l'yth-Otp V'ntha. Say nine times to the undying stars and time will be as naught.*

The dark person was back inside my head and I knew the dark person was me and had always been me. It was my curious and dreaming self. When I was 12, I remember pulling a fire alarm at my elementary school — I knew it was wrong but I just wanted to see what would happen. When I was 16 I dropped acid for the same reason. When I was 21, I revealed that a professor was sleeping with one of his students — just to watch the misery of their lives unfold.

I had always denied this dark part of myself. I am a respected member of my profession; I give to the right charities, send money to my aging mother. I'm a nice guy; yet I'm also Satan wanting to rebel against the cosmic order.

I knew I would say the words. I would meet the Messenger, if indeed I had not already done so in my dreams and strange memories. I decided to wait 10 days until April 30, a night associated with the witches' Sabbat on which cursed poets and evil aecns are born.

Having made my decision to commit a cosmic crime, I suddenly felt very free and happy. It was as though tons of repressed energy poured into my psyche. In the 10 days that followed I finished a cataloging project I figured would take me until June. I sent flowers to my mother, had a fantasy weekend with Sally in San Antonio, and put in a vegetable bed in my garden like I'd promised myself for eight years running.

On the day of the 30th I got a response on my "angular time" query.

Newsgroups: alt.mythology

Subject: Angular Time

Keywords: original (forwarded), Egyptian

Message ID: 12654@setnau.on.ca

Date: 30 Apr 93 11:30:07 GMT

Sender: decamp@setnau.on.ca

Lines: 12

The terms "angular" and "circular" time show up in Middle Egyptian djet and neheh. Neheh is the eternal recurrence of the seasons, annual flooding of the Nile, etc. It is almost equivalent with Maat meaning good or order. Djet is hidden, dark time associated with the gods Seth and Nyralothotep particularly the latter's shrine at the Temple to the Ka of the Pharaoh Nephren (XXth dynasty).

You may wish to consult the Typhonian Tablet at C.W. Post University, which is a Ptolemaic redaction of a Set-Nyar cult manual. I hope this helps you in your quest. Erik Hornung has written on hidden and revealed time, but I fear his articles are all in German.

Thomas DeCamp.

I took this as a sign that the dark powers looked kindly upon me. The word *neheh* was interesting. It was related to Mekhen, the Egyptian world-serpent that separated the ordered and unordered realms whose Gate was mentioned in the spell. I could see that this knowledge had blossomed and been repressed in many cultures, but something about it manifested from age to age. Maybe it was because the knowledge itself worked outside of time.

I waited til 9:30 before I said the words. I had meant to wait til midnight but was overcome with anticipation. I went into my back yard, lay down on a lawn chair and nine times uttered the spell:

*Yk p't tha M'Khen l'ly-z-d'ayn V'g'br't'r N'yraj-l'yth-Otp V'ntha.*

Nothing happened and I felt like a damned fool. No visions of the Middle East, no man in scarlet robes, no nothing. This had to mark a lifetime's low spot.

I went back in the house, hoping that none of my neighbors had overheard me, and reached to turn on a light.

"Don't do that. I'm not quite ready for you to see how I look."

It was his voice, the man I had met in my dreams. I was so startled I didn't even think of disobeying.

"Sit down," he said, and I found my way to a chair in the dark.

"Those weren't dreams. A lot of me is focused in that time. It is easier to bring you to me if you want to see me as a man. I'm inspiring a poet named Abdul Alhazred. He is writing quite a book."

"The *Necronomicon*."

"I think the Greek Title is unfortunate. Book of the Dead. I assure you it describes a reality far more lively than your own."

"Why did you write the *Yellow Text*?"

"It incites curiosity. Alhazred was led to madness, John Dee pro-

*Continued on page 73*





# K I N T O Crows

BY CHRISTOPHER ROWE

*Illustration by David Martin*

**T**he charred-looking bird worried at the fish some with a sharp claw.

It teased a morsel from the fleshy place behind the dead eye, where the sweetest meat lay.

Its own eyes were weak, too weak to see the three boys resting by the water upstream. Still, its head was cocked toward them.

"You watching that crow, Japheth?" asked the youngest of the boys.

"I'm watching him," answered his cousin. "I think I know that one, I've seen him getting fat off your mama's garden. He must have decided that the safest place for him to eat is wherever you boys are with your shotgun."

The third boy, brother to the youngest,

*Vengeance is a dish best served cold — much the way carrion birds prefer their meals.*

said, "We could hit them if they would come in close enough. Them birds know how far that 16 gauge will reach is all."

Japheth smiled — he was always smiling — and nodded down the creek. The bird still tore at the carcass of the bluegill. It still seemed to keep them under its beady gaze.

"How far to that crow as you judge it, cousins?"

The brothers studied the distance, 70 or 80 yards. They considered the gun leaning against the rotting willow log behind them.

"Now hold on there," said Japheth, "I ain't got a daddy to give me a shotgun. But little squirt there has got him a pocketful of chert rocks."

The youngest said, "Them's all my best

throwing rocks, Japheth. You go get your own if you want to be hitting some old bird."

His older brother, 15 and so not quite as old as Japheth, not quite as tall or as broad in the shoulders, stood up and stretched his arms over his head. "He ain't going to hit any bird," he said. "He ain't going to get a rock halfway there. Turn out your pockets."

The little one had some chalk in there, too, and a length of string wrapped around a hickory shank, and five or six smooth, round stones the size of small apples.

"Go ahead, squirt," said Japheth. "Show us how strong you are."

The boy bunched his shoulders up under his broadcloth shirt. He set his jaw firm and his feet wide apart. With a little grunt, he flung the rock down the creek.

It fell into the water, a little over halfway the distance to the crow. The bird rolled the bluegill over with its feet and started pulling at the other side of the head.

Japheth let out a low whistle. "Farther than your brother will throw his, I'll wager. You're going to be a boss, boy. That's your mama's people, right there. Us Sapps are mostly like big brother here, right? Skinny and puny. Ain't that right, big brother?" Japheth was always teasing.

The older brother burned a little, but just a little. Japheth had been staying with them just long enough for him to get used to the cut-ups and japes.

He ignored Japheth's whistling while he picked out a rock, leaned back, and heaved. It fell short. The bird did not look up from where it was flaking scales off the fish's side with its beak.

Japheth picked up three stones and tossed them in the air above his head. He kept two aloft and asked his cousins, "How many of these rocks you want me to hit that bird with?"

The little one watched his cousin wide-eyed, though he'd seen the juggling before. His big brother, who'd seen the showing off plenty, said, "Throw if you're going to, Japheth Sapp."

Japheth smiled and let the stones drop, two into his right hand and one into his left. He faced his cousins, his back to the bird. "I guess I'm going to," he said.

Then he wheeled. He turned on his heel and wheeled his arms, right, left, right, threw, threw, threw. Faster than the wheels on the train that ran through Jericho, 20 miles south. Faster than the cars people had started bringing up as far as Stone's Camp.

But not the fastest Japheth could move, no. While the brothers stood and watched the stones follow one another in an arc that led up above the tree tops then down — down toward where the bird still pecked and scratched at the fish — Japheth stole between them and snatched their gun. He threw it to his shoulder and shot, pumped, shot, pumped, shot.

And the rocks exploded. Shards of crystal caught the sunlight and reflected it in a thousand colors as they splashed down into the creek and onto the banks, thunder followed by rain.

Followed by the crow twitching its head, shaking off flecks of lightning and then bending back to its meal.

Followed then by Japheth laughing and hooting and dancing. Followed by his cousins shaking their heads, shaking their heads over Japheth showing them up again, showing them up and teasing them and how he laughed. He laughed and called like a jay. He laughed and called a little bit like a crow.

JAPHETH DROPPED INTO A CROUCH. THE BRANCH HE STOOD ON WAS broad enough and thick enough to run train tracks along, he figured. He could not make out the top of the chestnut from where he stood, it stretched up too close to Heaven. Three long strides would have taken him to the edge, where he could peer down to the ground, but he didn't want to see how high he was.

A crow settled near him, curling its feet around the branch.

There were some leaves springing out from a stray twig near Japheth. He took one and wrapped it around him like a blanket. The crow was hopping, shifting, but not toward him.

The bird croaked and gasped. It shook and cawed so loud that Japheth almost cried out in pain, it hurt his ears so.

Then the crow retched and spat up some arms and legs. They were red, they were burnished and bloody. Japheth was close enough to see the scars on the arms. He could see the blackened calluses on the soles of the feet. He looked up at the crow.

He looked up at the crow that was studying him, measuring him.

THERE WERE DOGS AND KIDS RUNNING BOTH BANKS OF THE CREEK beside the Childers' farm. Fiddles were scratching and there was a man churning ice cream. A rare day, then; some there had gone all the way to the ice house on a Danville.

Edwin Childers had a tidy little place. He kept the meadow mowed down when he didn't have cattle grazing it. Below the meadow was his corn field, then the tobacco patch. Lined up down Bittersweet Creek — house, barn, crib, fields.

The yard and the pasture were full of people when Japheth and his cousins came down out of the hills. They took the rabbits they had snared and cleaned to some women by the cook fires, then found some other boys.

"Sesquicentennial," one of them was saying, carefully. "I heard Mr. Childers say it to the preacher. It's the same as 150%."

"I don't think that's it," another boy said. "But I don't know for sure. All I care is that it means ice cream and firecrackers."

Japheth said, "And whiskey, too, or that's not Elijah Lehman there." So he and some of the wilder boys had clay jars out when it got dark.

And it was after dark that Edwin Childers lit torches around his lawn. He got up and witnessed a little, told how he loved America and how him and some others there had gone and fought for her. Then he sat back down because he didn't like to talk much, even if he was a deacon.

The fiddlers started in for sure, then, and couples swung around the barnyard, stomping and reeling. Japheth was old enough for marrying and all the girls were calf-eyed over him. He danced with a dozen.

He danced and he sang. He led a quartet in "Standing on the Promises" and sang the high part on "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say." He pulled pennies out of the ears of the little ones and put them in his pocket. He scratched the old hounds behind their ears. He drank some more from those clay jars.

But the girls started shying away from him after a while, after he stole a kiss or two too many. So he took a rock and a wooden ball and a piece of kindling that was weighted right, and he set to juggling them. The girls didn't come back still, so he took up three of the torches Edwin Childers had put out for light. They flew around his head.

The preacher came up on him. "Time to head on home, isn't it, Japheth?"

"Ain't got no home, Brother." Toss.

"Oh, you're blessed, Japheth. You've got a half-dozen homes and more in Cane County. Ain't one among your uncles and aunts haven't put you up that I know about."

"Just passing through, then, Brother. Ain't nobody to tell me when I got to go home, is there?" Catch.

"Well, boy, I knew your mama and daddy both. I married them, didn't I? I think they'd say it was time to go on home."

"My mama and daddy are feeding nightcrawlers under that patch of Johnson grass back of your church, though. Ain't they, Brother?" Toss.

The preacher drew up, then. "The eye that mocketh at his father," he said, "and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out."

Japheth caught the torches. The fire light showed the sweat streaming off his forehead, but it didn't reach the black hills on either side of the creek. "I never been out of this valley, Brother, not in my whole life. I never saw no ravens."

"You go home, boy. You go home and read Leviticus. Every raven after his kind" it tells us."

The preacher stalked off to tend some found sheep. Japheth, he stood still a minute. Then some boys started egging him on, so he juggled fire.

HE JUGGLED FIRE. HE THREW IT.

He threw fire and he caught fire. High into the air, higher than the roofs of the barn and the corn crib, he threw it. Higher than the tops of the willow trees.

And he never made a false throw. He never missed a catch. He was never off, not by an inch. So the torch that came down wrong, well, could that have been Japheth's fault? More than one man there saw the black shape dart out of the sky, more than one woman saw the fire knocked spinning.

The barn and the crib were old. A great great uncle of Edwin's had built them when people first came up Bittersweet. The house was new, though, the Childers' prize. The old one had been torn down and the new one put up in just a week. A lot of the men there had some sweat in that house. Even Japheth had some sweat in it.

And so they worked hard to save it. There were enough there to run two bucket lines down to a deep place in the creek. The corn got stamped down to do it, but they saved the house. They were bone tired and weary, black from smoke and red-faced from heat, but they saved most of the house.

But the barns . . . Fire is peculiar. It can hide. It can hide under the ground and under leaves. It can hide in ashes, sure, and in sweet alfalfa hay it can hide and it *did* hide. It waited, and it grew angry. All those exhausted people, when that sound like Goliath drawing in a breath came from the barn loft, they lifted their eyes to heaven and somebody said, "Rescue me, O Lord."

Time and Sun had seasoned the old timbers. Rafters to packed dirt floor, the fire took the old barn, took it fast. When they screamed, the horses sounded like women.

JAPHETH CLIMBED THE BLUFFS above the creek in the dark. He found some ferns in the high places and made a bed in a sheltered spot between boulders. The fronds smelled like the woods, but when he finally fell asleep, Japheth only smelled smoke.

THE CROW HOPPED OVER TO WHERE Japheth hid. It took him up in one foot and pulled him from his hiding place. It swiveled its head back and forth, back and forth, looking at him.

Then it leaned in with its beak and trimmed off his arms. It gobbled them down, then stripped off his legs.

"Look here, crow," called Japheth, "Those are my strong arms and legs." The crow dropped Japheth off the side of the branch. As he fell into the dark, he heard it laugh and laugh.

JAPHETH PASSED LEFT-OVER WISPS OF SMOKE ON HIS WAY DOWN OFF the hill. He backtracked them to the Childers' place. He saw the women — Edwin's wife and all his pack of daughters — down by the creek, pulling things back and forth in the water, rubbing clothes against rocks.

Edwin Childers stood among the blackened timbers of his corn crib. His crib, his father's, his grandfather's. He was staring at some red coils.

Japheth was an early riser. No one else had made the trip back yet, to start the rebuilding. He drew a breath to speak.

Edwin Childers, big Edwin Childers, swung his bull head around. He untied the knots in his shoulders and arms and back, then reached for the boy.

JAPHETH SAPP — SLY YOUNG JAPHETH, QUICK AND SURE AND STRONG young Japheth — fell to the rocky earth and it broke him.

Edwin Childers' feet were shod with heavy brogans. He didn't have any trouble snapping Japheth's clever fingers. Japheth could tease a trout out of Bittersweet any time he wanted before that. He could pick funny little tunes on a borrowed guitar before that.

Before that, Japheth could fork hay all day long in hard June light, but that sheet of muscles wasn't thick enough. Edwin's boots found the boy's ribs easy.

Before, Japheth Sapp could catch any girl's eyes with his even white smile. Kick.

Before, he could hear a mule coming up the creek from a half-mile away. Kick.

He could run from the Bittersweet Church to Stone's Camp and not get winded. He could race squirrels up oak trees, and he could sing, how he could sing. Kick. Kick. Kick.

Japheth Sapp fell to the rocky earth and it broke him. It nearly unmade him.

UPSTREAM WAS RIGHT. AGAINST THE FLOW OF THE WATER, HE dragged himself up through a red haze, red that the creek water didn't quite wash away. Against the water, against the slope of the ground. Whichever way was the hardest to crawl was the right way.

The old woman had the farthest place up the creek. She found him when she went for water, lying in shallows, murmuring through split lips. His hands clawed at the gravel.

Sister Ruth was from off someplace, but she'd married a Connely so she was a relation. She was widowed and her one boy had died with Japheth's father. She didn't worship with all those United



# More than one man there saw the black shape dart out of the sky, more than one woman saw the fire knocked spinning.

Brethren along the creek and she didn't see people much. But she knew Japheth, and she took him in.

SHE FED HIM SOUP AND MADE POULTICES FROM MOSS AND CREEK mud. She trimmed poplar branches into splints and set his legs as close to straight as she could.

After a few days, he could have talked to her. Sister Ruth was used to not talking, but she spoke to him sometimes. It seemed polite.

When she gave him new clothes she said, "Army sent these back with Ezra. You eat enough of that soup and you'll fill them out." They were heavy, gray things, trousers and shirts and a long coat.

After a few weeks, she took him outside with the dogs in the air and sunshine. His eyes weren't as good as they had been. He could see the crows, though. He could see them watching him.

JAPHETH WATCHED THE CROWS BACK, HE WATCHED THEM CLOSE. First, he learned that crows aren't just black. "Black as an old crow," people said, and there was some truth to that. It just wasn't all the truth. The yellow and orange in their beaks and feet, yes, but blue? Their wings had blue in them. Sometimes he saw red in their eyes, even before they started coming in closer.

And the sound of crows. *Caw, caw*, they cry. But a crow whistles sometimes, too. Japheth heard crows fuss like jays and giggle like girl children. He heard them babble like the creek over gravel.

The feel of crows — the sharp points of their claws and the soft lift of their feathers — that came later. Some time would pass before he learned their dusty, gamy smell.

JAPHETH HEALED SLOWLY. HE HEALED BADLY. HIS LEFT LEG HAD A bend to it. There was a rattle in his chest and he breathed too hard. He didn't have his same face any more. His nose was twisted and his lips wouldn't meet.

But, he was able to hobble down into the yard to throw feed to the chickens and the dogs.

Most times, when he'd finally managed to creep his way back up onto the porch, he'd find a crow perched on the swing where he usually sat. Sometimes he shooed them away, sometimes he went inside.

One day Sister Ruth said, "You know about the crow funeral?"

Japheth didn't say anything.

"You see a crow laid out dead, somewhere, you get there quick enough after it's killed?" Her talk was from up in the mountains. His Connelly cousin had found her in Harlan or some place back around there when he went off and found out he wasn't a miner.

"All these other ones come around, don't they? They's hundreds of them, I guess. And they's all jabbering and carrying on like they do. And then they all hush up at once. And it's all quiet like after a shot in the woods. And they just sit there a time, don't they?"

He didn't answer. He didn't know.

"Then, after they been sitting there for a while, they all start in cawing again. Then they light out to wherever it is crows go."

It was time to feed the dogs, so he went out to the porch. Crows were in the trees and on the rocks. They perched along the ridge of the barn.

It was quiet, like after a shot in the woods.

HE WOULD SCARE THEM OFF. HE found the rags of clothes Sister Ruth had found him in and gathered them into a tattered pile. He brought straw and tobacco sticks from the barn and broke his silence to ask her for needle and thread.

His fingers and eyes wouldn't help him, though. He cursed when he couldn't thread the needle, then wept when he didn't have the strength to break the sticks into the lengths he wanted.

His cousin was passing him there on the porch once and saw him at his fumbings. She bent to help him but when he glared at her, she shied off. His eyes had more red than white in them, still.

Alone, he stitched up the rents in the shirt and trousers. Alone, he sewed shut the arms and the legs. He took handfuls of straw and stuffed them into the clothes, all the while promising himself, "I'll scare them birds off, I'll scare them clean off."

But when he looked down at his crooked hands, he saw they'd done their stuffing too well. The new seams had parted and the straw spilled onto the boards of the porch floor. He didn't have to shoo away the dogs when he bent to pick up the scattering, they'd gotten tired of him, finally. Tired or wary.

The tobacco sticks were slim lengths of milled poplar, dusty with the years they'd lain in the barn. They suited the job well, straight as they were, and light and strong.

When his arms failed him, he used his feet and the edge of the porch to snap the sticks into lengths, the lengths of a man's arms and legs, the length of straight back. He fell off the porch every time he brought his weight down. His cousin had already learned that the

time for going near him had passed so she only watched him drag himself out of the mud.

He lashed the sticks together with grass string, then damned the straw and hung the rags on the frame. He stole a white flour sack from the kitchen, then cast around for more tools. On the mantelpiece he found a box that held an empty lantern, a lump of shiny black coal, other old things. He took a battered felt hat — the same one the groom wore in the tinted picture on the wall — and the coal.

He dragged the frame of poplar and cloth to the edge of the barn lot and drove it into the soft ground. The flour sack wouldn't hold the shape he wanted, the black strokes he'd drawn for a face shifted and twisted in the wind as wild as the clothes did. But he shoved the hat down over the sack and figured he was done. He would scare them off.

When they went out the next morning, there were no birds. The crows were gone. But so was his handiwork. Gone from where he'd left it, at least.

Ruth saw something she knew in the weeds by the creek. She looked at him, scared and angry both, and walked to the bank. As he lurched up, she moved away from him, the dripping hat in her hand.

The bits of cloth weighed down the sticks and kept them from floating away. The tangle bobbed in the shallows, and the current moved the sleeves of the torn shirt back and forth over the gravel.

The first jeering crow landed on a flat rock a few yards away. They were teeming thousands by the time he made it into the house.

FOR A LITTLE TIME HE TRIED TO HIDE FROM THEM. BUT HE COULD hear them calling outside the windows.

**When they went out the next morning, there were no birds. The crows were gone. But so was his handiwork.**

Then he tried to be rid of them again, tried to fight them. But his rocks wouldn't reach them. He couldn't have lifted a gun, even if she hadn't hidden them all.

The days got shorter and the flocks grew. The trees cloaking the hills passed from green with leaves to red with leaves — or yellow or brown or orange with leaves — to black. Black with birds.

THE GREAT CROW SNATCHED HIM FROM HIS FALL AND DROPPED HIM onto a branch. As it settled in beside him, he asked, "Why did you catch me, old bird?"

The crow laughed and laughed. It said, "These are my strong arms and legs."

ONE NIGHT JAPHETH SAPP WALKED AWAY FROM HIS COUSIN'S HOUSE.

He limped through the trees along the creek. He could see his breath clouding in the moonlight. He saw a shadow dart across the Moon, then another.

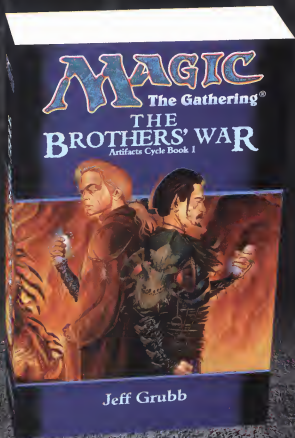
The first one hit with a muffled *caw*, a feathered whirlwind burrowing down the back of his long soldier's coat. Then crows tore at his clothes and tangled in his hair. They picked and cut and battered. He would have fallen under their weight, but they kept

*Continued on page 74*

# Two brothers locked in conflict.

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# I Bring You Forever

*Did the sages not say, in Jeriklah, each human thing is but a little place of life, surrounded by the desert? (2) Just so, the palace towered upon its neck like the back of a lion, and all about, the town, pinned to the Earth by towering trees and streams of water. But beyond—beyond, the great lakes of dust, whose close hot breath is the desert wind. Gardens falling like green steps. A fountain that sprinkles, by night, the water drops of the stars. But beyond, beyond, the hot white Moon that has the face of the skull of the gazelle. There are bones under the dust. And bones in Heaven, too.*

WHEN SHE WAS A YEAR OLD, the king saw his daughter for the first time. He had been at war, triumphed, and come home. Three beautiful wives had already given him several strong sons. But his favorite wife, the fourth, had borne during his absence a female child. The woman approached, her soft hair falling to her waist and filled with tiny golden bells that made a placating noise. Her lambent eyes were downcast. (A nurse held the child sidelong, as if to hide it.)

"Forgive me," said the fourth wife.

"I shall only," said the king, catching her to him, "not forgive you for thinking me such a savage. Forgive you for what? For bearing me another such as you, to charm the hearts of men like music?"

Presently he took the girl child, who smiled and waved little fists, trying to snatch his jeweled earring. "See, she wants this." The king

removed the costly earring, broke off the sharp hook by which it had held to his ear, and gave it to his daughter. "She must have everything she wants," he said, warm with victory, homecoming, lust, and simple happiness. "Always."

They had not named the child, for fear he would not want it to have even a name.

So the king named her Zulmeh, which in that tongue meant Diamond—the gem she had reached for.

THE DIAMOND CHILD GREW up. A clear child, like cool water slenderly poured. And her hair was like dark copper, and her eyes a smoky green, like jade.

As she grew, so grew the town of the desert king. Long channels were made to conduct the water of the oasis, enamel roofs arose, and towers and lions of white stone.

BY TANITH LEE

Illustration by Carol Heyer





By the day she was, Zulmeh, 10 years of age, the king was called Great King. And by the year she was 13, he was dead. A tomb was built for him that the desert people said was a wonder of the earth, and traveled far to see. Pillars and stairs raised it up to Heaven, showing it to the sky and the gods above, as if to ask them, What have you done?

But the Princess Zulmeh was only 13. What was death to her? It was true she wept beautifully as she followed the king's bier among the flowers of his weeping women. But it was only that the sad songs made her cry. She had scarcely known him. He had always been away at war, and in the end war had claimed him utterly, with the spear that pierced his vitals.

Her mother had died too, somewhere in those years. But her mother had not meant very much either. Her mother belonged to the Great King.

Only one thing Zulmeh knew for sure. That whatever she asked for she was given. How strange, perhaps, she never thought to ask, as another child would, for her father or her mother. She must have learned very early, perhaps even that morning in the arms of the king, that she would be given bright and shining things, valuable things, mystical and longed for. Hard, too. Hard as diamond. But nothing easy. Nothing that was hers—by right?

It would seem then she was a demanding child. Not so. She learned also, and quickly, to choose with care what she would have.

At seven years, asking for a particular beast, which she had been told of, she saw a caravan dispatched for a foreign land, to fetch it. One year later they returned, those who that had survived the dreadful trek, and they brought her, stiff and stuffed, the animal she had wanted, since it too had perished on the journey. One more lesson. Hard lesson. Diamond lesson.

WHEN SHE WAS 15, ZULMEH'S brothers fell to fighting among themselves for the crown of Great King. Their armies clashed out in the desert, and from a place high on the city walls, one might see a flash of swords and arrows, over and over, and the dust rising like a purple column to uphold the indifferent sky.

The victor presently returned. His name was Hazd.

He swept the city like a broom, and settled on the golden lion throne, and called them all to admire him there. He asked who the girl was, the royal girl with dark red hair. They told him. Hazd said he would marry this girl, to uphold his claim to his father's throne. They were only half brother and sister, he and the Diamond, and Hazd was a bastard.

Strangely, again, for one taught she might have anything she asked for, Zulmeh must have known not to ask to be spared her half brother. But then, he was ebony-skinned, with corded hair that fell to his knees, lion-strong, a warrior and a poet. And she had never known him as a brother, as she had never known, let us be exact, father or mother.

They were wed, and he led her to a pavilion high on the palace roofs, and from there he showed her the enormous desert of dust in the settling dust of evening.

"What do you see, Zulmeh?"

"The Great Sands," she answered.

"No, you see my kingdom. Soon that absence of life will be covered by the life of my city."

But then they sat drinking sweet wine, and he played a melody for her on a lap-harp of ivory. He sang a song he had made for her. It compared her to the Moon, now lifting over the desert. But Hazd did not say the Moon was a skull. No, it was a young girl, whose eyes were green, if only one might see them. Of all his fine songs, this was, at that time, the most beautiful.

Zulmeh listened. Perhaps she thought, if she had not already, "I want and must have this man—"

At midnight, colored birds were uncaged above the roofs of the palace, where, behind the highest lighted windows, the city knew that Hazd and his bride were mated and made one.

She  
had learned her  
lesson, had she not. No father  
nor mother. No child. And, at  
last, no lover-husband either.

THEIR LOVE WAS GLORIOUS. HE told of it in his songs, carved into the stone pylons of the city, beside his lion songs of war. But Zulmeh left no record of this love. For some reason she did not conceive his child. He would have assured her not to mind it. He had plenty of women who could do that in her stead.

Was there ever a night or morning then, standing in the high place, when Zulmeh invoked magic from the stars or those strange otherworlds, the planets, or the gods, or the Sun or the Moon, saying: I want and must have the child of Hazd—I—I—No.

There never was. She had learned her lesson, had she not. No father nor mother. No child. And, at last, no lover-husband either.

Zulmeh was 17 years, when one brother returned across the desert, a true son of their father. His name was Hroor. He slew Hazd in single combat, before the gates of Jeshlah. Did she see? Yes. But she was high up on the walls. Such little figures—so far off. Did she ask the gods for his life? Perhaps she thought of the exquisite living animal brought dead and mummified and laid before her. Perhaps she asked a moment too late—even as Hazd fell, dying—but by then her request would have been only a denial, Oh let it be not so. A prayer must always be framed, the sages tell us, in the positive mode. Never do not, but only Let it be so.

If she thought she would be given to Hroor, the victor, with the other wives, she was correct. But Hroor was not a man for women, and did not trouble any of them. Also, not being a man for women, he was kind to them. Seeing Zulmeh stand alone, white as ivory in her red hair, dry-eyed green among the wailing queens of Hazd, Hroor asked who she was.

Then, "Ah," said Hroor. "The Diamond. I remember well my father's decree. Take heed, all of you. Give her always what she wants."

She never wept when others wept by, not for grief, she who had always softly and publicly wept at melancholy music.

She sat alone, high up in the women's courts, in her own luxurious pavilion, which Hroor had not taken from her. She gazed away over the desert. Once or twice someone will have asked Zulmeh what she desired. She will have answered, "Nothing."

#### HROOR RULED THREE YEARS.

One warm evening, with a Moon like a bow in the sky, the faction that had risen against him took their omen, and shot him full of arrows.

He lay unburied in the street, flighted like some old dead bird, while the sections of Jeshlah fought together. When the fighting was done, in the hour before dawn, men came to Zulmeh's pavilion.

They kneeled down to her.

"You," said they, "are the last descendant left living of the blood of the Great King. Only you, our Diamond, are fit now to rule."

She saw their smiling, crafty, blood-streaked faces. She would be

Queen, but they would rule through her, for a woman was only an ornament, as the Moon only gave light.

But it was not a time to argue or declare what instead one wanted. She acquiesced meekly.

So Queen Zulmeh took the throne of Jeshlah.

AND SAGES TELL US, WISDOM COMES WITH THE YEARS, as with pain. We are scourged in the school of life that we memorize the lessons. To rule, even as a puppet and a woman, was dangerous, and so Zulmeh now encouraged, secretly, her own faction, those who revered her true royal blood, or were struck by her beauty and her sorrowful widowhood. Those too who liked power, but preferred it second-hand, the natural captains of a king.

When the fruit was ripe, Zulmeh the Diamond addressed them. It was a night of feasting in her private apartments. Cloth-of-gold, velvets strewn, tame birds with long tails of amethyst that stalked about, perfume playing in the fountains. The gold cups were raised high to praise the Queen and the gods.

Zulmeh spoke. "Never compare me to Heaven. They are perfect and eternal, and I have only my little span of being, which any moment may be wrenched away."

Then they cried out that they would serve her with their very lives. What did she wish of them?

She said: "I want safe rule in Jeshlah. I want the crown of Jeshlah and not its shadow. I must be rescued from those who, today or tomorrow, will cast me down, and all you with me, in a grave. I must have their heads."

The color crimson was on the room, crimson, purple, and gold. Before the lamps failed, on golden trays they brought her, her faithful men, 24 severed heads, dyed in their own red-purple blood.

Then Zulmeh truly was Queen in Jeshlah. And she had been given what she wanted.

SEVEN YEARS PASSED, AND THE CITY GREW LIKE A natural thing, until it filled the horizon on four sides. Then Jeshlah was called the Great City, and the Queen of it, Zulmeh, the Diamond, the Moon of Jeshlah. Whatever she wanted, she was given. A thousand towns and cities paid tribute to her. From the four corners of a horizon beyond the horizon of the Great City, came the merchandise of the world. Silk and sandalwood, precious jewels and priceless stones, trees of resin and cedar, baths of oil and wine. Men came there too, mighty soldiers and princes, musicians and poets, acrobats, magicians and scholars. All to the white wheel of the Moon of Jeshlah, wrapped in her copper cloud.

Feasts and shows of great extravagance were continually arranged. Here men fought to display their skill rather than to kill each other (although, quite often, kill each other they did). But also sorceries were worked of incredible kinds, to thrill and astound. And there were competitions for music and the making of songs. Jeshlah was civilized. Towers of books stacked scroll on scroll, volume on volume, the height of many tall men. Instruments that made a hundred ravishing sounds.

Zulmeh was in her 30th year. Among the poor such an age was a crone's age, but among the royal kindred it was not much.

A competition there was to be at which the best songs of all the world, as the world was known, were to be sung before her. Judges would award the prize not to the singer, but to the poet who had made the winning song.

As Zulmeh was carried to her stadium of music, she glittered flawlessly on her people. She had earned her name, they said, she blazed so bright with her riches they could hardly bear to look at her. Her face too, might have been cut from diamond, they said. So pure and radiant. (So hard?)

She sat and heard the songs. If her mind wandered now and then, no one could be sure. If she wanted anything, everyone might see it, a cup of wine, green figs or honey, the breeze of fans, and these things were given her at once.

Then a whispering began all about that did not quite center on

the Queen. If she had been thinking of other things, this noise recalled her. A man waited below, tuning a little lap-harp modestly. Presently he sang.

His voice was fair, but it was the song which held the stadium.

The song told how a poet had seen a woman, and thought her at once a harp of ivory, but strung with his own black hair. By herself, this harp could sound him, as if he had been will-less. Yet without the strength of her strings, these long black strands, her music must be dumb.

When the song ended, the world seemed itself made dumb.

Zulmeh inclined her head, on which an unaccountable fortune flamed and spangled. Who could miss the flash of these fires, like swords at work in the desert far away.

SHE WAS NOT UNLOVED, BUT THE LOVE HAD come with her station, the accessory of her rank. Doubtless what they had devised had been meant to please her, honor her, to be, even, kind. When finally the judges rose, they sky was red. But if any other songs had been sung, Zulmeh at least had not heard them. There was no deliberation. Naturally not. The judges declaimed their verdict to the stadium, which roared back its approval. Perhaps it truly was the best of all the songs, for Hazd had made it for Zulmeh, in the first year of their marriage.

It was the custom at such a festival, after the announcement of the winner, for the victorious poet to be called by a herald, three times. Nor did they omit this custom.

Loudly the name of Hazd was called, once, and then again, and then again.

And then all that stadium packed with people cried aloud for Hazd, and the noise rocked the sky, as if it were one huge bell of ruby glass.

Yet after the tumult, a silence fell, profound and terrible. The silence of a grave.

The Queen alone spoke softly, and none heard her. It was a silly childish thing she said. "He cannot take his prize. He is dead."

Darkness swept over the stadium. And all the kindled lights became little hopeless wisps beneath it. Anything might snuff them out. And nothing light up the black of the sky but the careless stars.

Zulmeh raised her face to these stars, and the tears glistened on her cheeks, and were, of course, taken for yet more jewels, by the crowd. It must be said, if they had heard what she uttered, they would have taken the words for the moistureless wit of kings.

But if they had thought to please or honor or be kind, they failed. They had only taught her one more lesson. For though she had known in her mind for 10 full years that Hazd was dead, only now did she know it. So long it took the message to sink home, like a slow, slow knife.

All that night she walked about the palace's high places. She touched the birds upon their gold stands, so they trilled or spoke, the leaves of exotic shrubs, so they gave off a myriad scents. She looked through the magnifying lenses of her mages, and saw the stars more closely, tinted rose and sapphire and bronze.

Later she whispered, "But even the stars go out."

And she gazed to the edges of the city, to the desert that surrounded all things.

Her counselors were anxious. They stood in anterooms, puzzling, planning, not yet plotting.

At first light she came back among them all.

She had no appearance of madness, rather she was implacable, as some had seen her father, the Great King. They bowed to the ground.

"Now I will tell you," said Queen Zulmeh, the Diamond, "what I must have. What I will have. What you must get for me." Never had they heard her so clear, so sure.

They waited in instinctive terror.

They were wise.

"Bring to me," said Zulmeh, "immortality."

ONLY ONE YEAR PASSES NOW, PERHAPS MORE SWIFTLY THAN all the others. Experiments of all sorts took place in Jeshlah, acts of

magic and religion, of devotion, of cruelty, elixirs, mythology, drugs, philosophy, poison. Men died, so that the Diamond might learn how to live.

Yet she did not learn. None learned, save only a few old tales which none could credit. All lessons require canny teachers.

Of her punishments for failure little is recorded. Possibly she was merciful. Only her looks of disappointment killed.

At the year's end, the city stood in its magnificence, yet about it hung a kind of smoke. And this inchoate thing towered up to the sky, like a pillar, a tomb. As if to ask the gods, What have you done?

"OH GREAT MOON," CRIED THE GIRL, CASTING HERSELF down before the Queen, "someone has come to the palace."

Zulmeh lifted her head, she stared, her green eyes fixed as a hawk's upon far distant prey. "Who now?"

The girl replied rapidly. "An old man, from the desert. But he says that he has heard of your quest—and has the remedy."

It was the hour of lamp-lighting. But the slaves stopped still and the tapers blew out in their hands.

"Bring him to me!" cried the Queen.

She rose up, thin and white and gleaming. Hard, hard, hard. Diamonds last, but they scratch scars on things, even merely by looking in their burnished eyes.

And the appalled girl rushes away, and then returns, with the man from the desert, evenly flanked by 12 guards. (Strangely. One for every full year since the death of love.)

Others had come, of course, to Jeshlah, promising they could find the way to get the Queen what she wanted. Perhaps none had said so decidedly that he possessed the goods already.

He was a tall old man, narrow as a stick, but straight and strong, sunburned, with a life carved on his face. Much scarred by years, he seemed unwary of the Diamond's scratch. But he was anomalous. So ancient a creature, to hold the secret of ageless eternity?

His clothes were ragged hides. He had no adornment but for his silver hair and the blackest black of his eyes. Such as he wandered the deserts, living in caves, feeding on sand, and drinking the dew. So poor a beggar to hold a secret that might have made him rich as any king?

"Kneel, old man," said the nearest guard. "On your knees before the Moon Queen of the Great City of Jeshlah."

At this, the old man smiled. Then he knelt with surprising agility on the tiled floor.

"Are you of this land?" asked the Queen's steward.

"Am I of any land?" asked the old man.

"What is your name?" frowningly asked the Queen's steward.

"What is a name?" smilingly asked the old man.

The steward indicated that the guard might strike the old man. Who laughed. And Zulmeh spoke to prevent the blow.

Then she ordered every one of her people from the room, and stayed alone there with the old man who knelted, smiling, on the floor. One so old and so poor and so arrogant and so unafraid must hold some secret, after all.

Then a while passed. A fly might be heard crawling on the wall. At last the Queen herself instructed the old man: "Speak."

He rose, and his smile was gone. He looked into her eyes and said, "I bring you forever."

It seemed to Zulmeh then, that all the lights that had been lit faltered and went dark. But a moment after, they burned up again, bright as before. As if time itself had blinked.

"What must you do," said Zulmeh the Diamond, "to make this so?"

"What indeed?"

"Tell me," she said.

"I have told. And I have done."

"Is it done then? But—is this all?"

"It is everything," said the old man.

He had stepped farther off, although she had not seen him do so. Maybe in that moment of the blinking of light and time. He seemed in shadow now, and the black of his eyes was almost violet—or red, a red-violet burning through the fabric of him, from within.

"Well," said the Queen, "you shall remain as my guest. There must be trials made, to see."

But across the room a curtain turned to a wind and blew, and he was gone in it, gone away, gone out like a lamp that did not rekindle.

The Diamond stood alone, and touched her face with her smooth fingers. (And how smooth they felt.) Am I changed?

THE MOON OF JESHLAH RULED IN HER CITY. "She is the Diamond," they said, "see how smooth and burnished-bright she is, graceful and slender, her metallic hair and expensive eyes. Not a mark on her. Always the same." But they squinted as if also they beheld that now each day was for her like each previous day. And each night all other nights. One eternal day and one night of forever.

Times unravels, samenesses, changes...

All the days and nights the same. Where do they go to? Changing into what?

Zulmeh left her bed early, and her women brought her a cordial of roses and mint. As she drank it, she saw them changed and changing. There a pale young girl, but now more fallow than pale. And there a voluptuous girl, whose figure drooped. And there, and there, a thread of gray in the silken hair, or hair too colorful, dyed to hide the gray.

When they laughed or sulked, Zulmeh saw the cracks time made in their enamels.

They clothed her and brought her jewels. Their hands were not so deft as they had been. Their perfume not so fresh.

Zulmeh gave an audience. Gnarled hands on yellowing papers... chipped voices... Now Zulmeh walked in her gardens. On the green steps, places opened slyly in the arbors. The white marble of the seat, as she sat admiring it, realizing that it had lost its glow. Flowers had burned themselves out. The vines were ancient and the grapes, that hung to be plucked, no longer tempting. Green droplets of juice shriveled to raisins.

Zulmeh looked aside into the palace courts. Children had become stubborn adults, and moved grumbling and fussing there. Already their shoulders were bowed. Their tones coarsened.

The Sun rushes to the apex. She was left behind it.

She re-enters a great pavilion—

She ate a meal in one of the great pavilions, among her nobles and captains. The gray is creeping in their hair. Rheumatic hands, old wounds that hurt them. The dogs were thin, with filmy eyes. Young dogs stand up on wild ungainly legs—steadied, and began at once to stiffen like the beautiful dead mummy brought her once across the world.

The lilies that had been wound in the garlands crumbled away. The bread has a taste of mildew.

Zulmeh gives another audience. Over the floor, feverish ambassador, the Sun hurries, moving so fast.

Old men paraded before her who had entered the palace young men. The tribute of sparkling veils spread for her delight were fraying at their edges. Only the hard jewels dimly shone.

Soon the palace and the city slept in the heat of afternoon. The Queen prowls like a panther up and down.

Over the Earth the Sun now shuffled. The Sun was old, and surely had lost some of its light. The sunset burned out like the dullest flower.

Zulmeh bathed once more and was dressed once more. Morning? Night? Old women tended her, she sees the bones behind their faces, their breasts are fallen empty bags.

The tiles in the floor had been rubbed almost clean of their pictures.

Time flew, flies, has flown. It flew, flies, had flown, over and over, circling the dish of the world. Like the blinking of the lamps, the sunrise and sunset, the flicker of the black-blue eyelids of night.

A dead bird lay on the terrace. It always lay there, lies there, or another bird. No more songs.

Zulmeh looked out to the four corners of the horizon, and her powerful city was laid like a carpet before her. But the wind and Sun had pared away the colors of the city. The old trees leaned or had fallen or been cut down. An axe strikes. There, another will fall, falls, fell.

At last, one day, some day, Zulmeh has them bring her carriage, and was carried through the streets. She watched the elderly people bowing to her, painfully, and the children stand taller and gain their first true balance—and stiffening there at once to statues of pallid wax. She watched the lights die in their eyes already long ago, heard their shrill bright savage voices tamed to monotonous regret.

Dead flowers littered the carriage, thrown in alive. Thrown in, yesterday, tomorrow?

"How wonderful is the Queen-who-is-a-Moon," she heard the fissured voices croak, "she has not aged one hour." Or do they only mutter against her, that she is a witch?

The guards marched by the carriage, and their breathing rasped, their foot-falls rang heavy, exhaustedly.

Now the buildings of the Great City of Jeshlah are and were partly ruinous, with stones fall-fallen out. The inhabitants crouched in hovels made from bits. The dust of the desert had come in and covered everything it could, thick as yellow flour.

There was a huge gateway, a gate of triumph inlaid with blue lapis, and guarded by two lions higher than the towers around. But the lions had lost, one, his forepaws, and the other his head. And the lapis rains out of the doors. Had rained out of the doors. Here and there a blue petal of lapis lay and lies, in the dust. One petal that would not fade. Already fading.

Zulmeh left the carriage.

The ancient men in their tarnished armor stared at her with half-blind eyes. When the Queen said that she would walk a little in the desert beyond Jeshlah, they remonstrated, but feebly.

"Rest," said Zulmeh. "Rest a while."

She thought that when she turned back to them they must be skeletons, fallen or propped on their shields and spears.

It seemed to her she moved like a slim white knife and cut a way through dust and age and time, and as she cut, her own cutting made her sore. And conversely the rush of everything toward death, leaving her behind as did the Sun and the Moon and the stars, rubbed on her, grazed her. But a Diamond is polished finer by abrasion. So they say and said.

When her feet, in priceless sandals (of which now the straps gave way) met the flame-harsh grit of the desert's back, Zulmeh paused a moment.

"This I know," said the Queen. "For you are made by the grinding up of all else, as now, it seems, am I."

So she walks among the sloping dunes.

The racing hound of the Sun ran more slowly yet, aging, losing ground.

Zulmeh stared after its bled-out shape, all wrapped in a distant

storm of dust. She would, then, outlive the Sun? She would outlive the world? She, and the desert.

The frayed veils of dust, the desert's tribute, furled over the city, which seemed finally like a mirage. Soon every tower would drop down. Every wall collapse. Jackals would howl among the wreck—for a moment, only for a moment. The Moon would set behind the Sun and darkness would come, but not the dark of night. Night too will have died, with all the stars, for she has said before, the stars go out.

Zulmeh walked, and the Sun came and went, comes and goes, and night likewise, and she reached and reaches a little place of life surrounded by the desert.

Two trees rose above a pool. A deer was drinking there, and seeing the blown white brilliance of the Queen, the deer sprang away. But as it touched the Earth again, it lost its vivid momentum. Through the flesh, Zulmeh saw its Moon-skull stare at her.

The Queen of Jeshlah sat down by the pool of the oasis. She thought she must be thirsty, and so cradled some water in her hands and drank it, before the pool should dry up and shrink away.

From two trees spread a shade that seemed cold, and almost still. Zulmeh sat down there.

But, as she spread her hand in the shade, the shade seeps off, as soon, surely, the pool must do.

Zulmeh sat beneath the trees, and the shade came and went, comes, goes, the cool of it, never staying long, the heat. Somehow the pool was replenished from some fountain under the ground. She thought achingly of Jeshlah. But Jeshlah must now be dust. A place of bones.

"Time moves so fast," said Zulmeh to the desert, "but only adds to you, and never diminishes me."

Winds blew, hot as the sting of a scorpion, and burnished the Diamond more.

"I wish," said Zulmeh, "how I wish I do not have forever. How I wish that I am dead." (The denying prayer that does no good.)

Then she lay down in the moment of the shade under the trees, to sleep. For she seemed not to have slept at all, for many hundreds of years. And after she had slept, this once, she might never sleep again. Although, when she woke, she knew the Earth too might have vanished, will have done, dashed and rushed down into the bottomless abyss of nothing. Opening her eyes, she would find only the desert and the darkness left, and the cry of the soulless winds of immortality, the music of unforgiving forever. (No more songs.)

But, even so—even so, she slept, she sleeps.

Zulmeh dreamed. For the sages said, even the eternal gods have dreams.

A man was walking over the sand, in the dream, and Queen Zulmeh got up and followed him. He was changeable, this man. First he was black as her lost lover, Hazd, or blacker perhaps, but his hair was not black. Then he seemed goldhaired, but also grayhaired. And then he had no hair, his head was smooth as a brown nut. And then his hair was black, and then silver. And then his hair was a wave or a wind which blew the world sideways.

However, changeable as he was, he did not dash only one way,

*Continued on page 84*

*Time  
flew, flies, has flown ... over and  
over, circling the dish of the world. Like  
the blinking of the lamps, the  
sunrise and sunset, the flicker of the black-  
blue eyelids of night.*

*Sometimes it's what we leave unsaid that speaks volumes.*

# MOMENTS OF TRUTH

BY ALAN SMALE  
*Illustration by John Berkey*

Angela knew she'd failed every test. She hadn't guessed which of the five cards with the star and the square and the wavy lines and all Stiles had been looking at in the adjacent room. She hadn't been able to identify the previous owners of the scarves and keys they'd brought her, hadn't been able to cast images onto photographic emulsion with her mind. They hadn't given her any spoons, but she couldn't have bent them with her touch in any case.

She wasn't surprised. She'd never claimed to be able to do any of that stuff in the first place.

It took no psychic powers whatsoever to sense the disappointment of her three Wise Men, determinedly casual in their sweaters and jeans.

Bennet and Stiles made eye contact, their quietness saying No way, and Let's quit while we're behind. For a couple of skeptics they did a lot of their own communicating without words.

Stiles leaned back and glanced at Hurley, the gray man who had stood at the back of the room with arms folded throughout the tests, saying nothing.

Now Hurley said: "Wrap it up."

Stiles got to his feet. "We'd like to thank you for your time, Mrs. Barnes, but I think we have everything we need for today."

They hadn't understood, and it made her mad. They'd all wasted so much time in this underground room, with its yellow walls, fluorescent lights, burned coffee.

Angela raised her hands to cut off his words, and then pointed at Bennet. "For this I gave up my

weekend?" she said, in a passable imitation of his voice. He frowned at her, and her finger moved on to Hurley. "Terrible old woman, worse even than my wife's mother." Hurley's face was impassive as she turned to Stiles. "Sunny day out. Wonder what the kids are up to. Poor old bag. Probably Alzheimer's."

"Oh my God," said Stiles as the color drained from his face.

Bennet threw his pen on the floor in exasperation. "Mrs. Barnes, for goodness sake — are you telepathic or aren't you?"

"No," she said. "No, I'm not, not really. That's what I've been trying to tell you all along."

This time, they listened. Then they made Angela wait in the coffee room for an hour before leading her down long tiled corridors painted the same government yellow, past a long series of brown doors marked only with numbers. She saw nobody on the journey, which took longer than it really should have done — her hip was act-





# "Well, to start with you'll be our little samples of everything you have and run you through

ing up, but she was damned if she'd ask any of these men to push her along in a wheelchair.

At last they took her through a lab filled with electronics, to a low metal doorway. When Bennet opened the door Angela backed away, hands fluttering around her mouth like birds.

Stiles took her arm. "Don't worry, Mrs. Barnes. It's only an anechoic chamber. It'll just be for a few minutes, and you'll be quite safe."

She listened to the brief spaces between his sentences and nodded. "And I'm sorry about the Alzheimer's crack," he added.

"You'll get old, one day," she said. "It happens quicker than you think. You wake up one morning and look at yourself in the mirror, and there you are, all crinkly and lame."

"It's a shame," he said.

Soft gray cones jutted from the walls. Her stockinged feet made no sound. The blood rang in her ears. When they closed her in it felt even more like a padded cell. Through the loudspeaker came Bennet's whisper. "Here's the first one. Take your time."

The total silence in the chamber altered in quality.

The hairs prickled on the nape of her neck. "The man is sitting in the electric chair. Waiting for the executioner to throw the switch. There's an audience of about 12 in the room beyond, and a priest and a doctor watching. That's horrible."

"No 2," said Bennet.

Silence returned, with a different but equally distinctive flavor. Angela rolled it on her tongue, inhaled it into her dry sinuses.

"Another priest. This one is waiting to hear 'I do.' The couple is Hispanic."

"Where's the wedding?"

"It's a big room, indoors. Not a church. Country club?" His voice annoyed her. She wanted to listen instead to the perfect quiet of the lovers beginning their new lives together.

"Here's No. 3."

Silence. "No. That's nothing at all. A blank CD that nobody has ever recorded anything on. Trying to catch me out, eh?" The cones on the wall damped her cackle into a creak.

"Very good. Here's No. 4."

"Sleeping baby. Blue ducky wallpaper."

Another long silence, which she could have interpreted easily enough if they'd only asked. Then Stiles opened the door. "OK, you can come out now. Let's go and sit down again. We'd like to discuss how long you've had this... ability."

A younger Angie arrived home after band, a pocket pinwheel shedding matter left and right: saxophone, book bag, lap top, coat. She stepped out of the cast-off rubble of her day at school and ran for the stairs.

Her Mom was not home yet. Every day it was a race, she had to get to the telephone answering machine first, just in case he called, and on Tuesday nights band practice made it a close-run thing.

Flashing red, furtive beacon, hit the button, no salesmen please.

His voice, held in stasis, waiting for her.

"Angie? Chris. I'll give you a second to pick up. OK you're not there, I guess. I was just calling to say, uh, I enjoyed hanging with you and Marie and Tony last week, you know, and I was going to ask you, like, if you wanted to go do something one night, go to a movie or whatever. Just me and you. Anyway. Call me." And a long pause, before he replaced the receiver gently back into the cradle.

She listened to it again.

Simple enough words, a straight line of meaning: greeting, purpose, parting. The tone of his voice added breadth, extra dimensions of subtext and hope. He spoke quietly, the way he might if they were

standing by a locker not wanting to be overheard, or... or if he was alone with her somewhere, his lips an inch away from her ear. As she listened to his voice on the tape, she could almost feel his breath on her hair.

And the silence, at the end....

She played it one more time, cranking the volume after "Call me" until the over-amplified plasticky sound of the receiver coming to rest crumpled the air. And again, alert for any mundanity that would invalidate that quiet moment. Was he perhaps at the end of a long cord, walking across his kitchen to hang up?

No, she heard no suggestion of movement, no footfalls. All the pause held was the very faint sound of a breath against the mouthpiece. He'd sat quietly in a chair, the receiver against his ear, feeling their connection, thinking of her, unwilling to end the moment, which as a result hovered in otherspace between them, a subtle whisper of promise for the future, a perfect stillness in the interstices between thought and action, between their meeting and their dating.

Angie was sure they would be dating.

She swapped the tape for a new one and hid his precious pause in her room, in the box where she kept her first daisy chain and her first nightclub ticket. Then she went for a walk down the street, rejoicing in youth and love, but always careful to avoid the cracks between the paving stones.

Angie and Chris dated, got serious, got degrees, got jobs, got married, shared the communion of crippling mortgage debt, moved to New Mexico, fought like tigers. On the worst days she felt trapped in a rock garden sewn with thorns, but then with equal swiftness everything would change and there would be love again, as deep and shatteringly glorious as the flowers that bloom on desert cacti by night.

Six years. Then, one day when menstrual cramps kept her home unexpectedly, she answered the phone and heard in the shocked, wordless silence a dyed blonde from Chris's office, her eagerness and warmth turned to startlement. Although Angie didn't tape the call, she replayed the silence in her head and realized this woman (Donna!) had recently spent five or six afternoons in a motel room with her husband and that today, right now, Donna needed to hear his voice with such a pungent, guilty desperation that she had almost asked to speak to him, had almost broken her cover with Angela, The Cuckolded Wife.

Soon Angie was listening to a new silence: the sound of a one-bedroom apartment filled with junk, with divorce papers strewn over the floor like confetti, but not like confetti.

The fabric of her life was structured around gaps, like lace.

Some of the gaps were the most breathless moments of her life. She remembered a stunned instant at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC between the end of a violinist's recital and the beginning of a riotous standing ovation. As she clapped and clapped and clapped, the tears rolled down her cheeks and trickled into the neck of her yellow dress.

As an actress in community theater she was a master of timing; the art of waiting, the hesitation that spoke volumes, the pauses that created character.

Ten years they were apart and she heard nothing. Then, Chris called her again. From the spaces between his words she knew he was a different man.

Angie agreed to meet him, and fell in love again.

# biology experiment," he said. "We'll take every piece of apparatus known to man ..."

Time had eroded the sharp edges of his personality into gentle curves . . . no, that wasn't fair, because it was a gain to him, and not a loss. He had a new incarnate gentleness that wretched him like a permanent lambswool cardigan only she could see. He had achieved a clever, penetrating, understated humor, a whole subtle aspect of him that had appeared out of nowhere and matured since their last times together. Her rock garden became rich with flowers that bloomed the whole year around.

They developed an understanding beyond words, and remarried.

## Twelve more years of uneventful marital delight, and then David happened out of the blue; strong, deep, silent.

At first his lips just grazed hers, tentative puckers against her cheeks, pushing against the corner of her mouth. Then tongues joined, curled around each other. Their lips never made a full seal for somehow that would have been wrong, a full dedication that neither of them was willing to risk.

And his hands, first stroking her arms, her back, finally questing, searching, encompassing. He kissed the curve of her jaw. Her nails dragged across his wrist.

When they had worn each other down with the insistence of this gentle neediness, she rested her cheek against his shoulder and let him hold her and kiss her hair, which he seemed to like.

They talked a little, just to hear each other speak in voices that spoke of normalcy and friendship, voices that denied the strange thing that was happening between them. Still dressed, still proper in every respect, they nevertheless each felt a wholeness and completion that was entirely satisfying.

This was all they needed. Each felt attractive to the other, and sated with affection, and it was enough. To go further would be tasteless and dangerous, and add nothing.

## Angela ground to a halt and critically examined her own silence. She had said ever so much more than she'd intended to, and ever so much less.

Stiles and Bennet looked at each other. Angela's gaze passed between them, as if by addressing the space that separated them she addressed both equally, which was true. "You see, you see?" she said. "It wasn't like Donna. Not at all. It wasn't an event. David was a tiny adventure, a thing bounded by Christopher, entirely by him. Without Chris, the thing with David would have been irrelevant and I'd have forgotten it years ago. Those moments proved Christopher, they made him central, they made him whole. Just like all gaps, all breaks, all interruptions, they validate the things they . . . punctuate. D'you see?"

Bennet and Stiles didn't look at each other. "We should move on," said Stiles.

"But this is the heart of what I'm trying to tell you. This is what brings it all together," she said, but ground to a halt. It really didn't matter whether or not they understood about David. They weren't interested. They had their own reasons. She wouldn't even have tried to explain if Hurley had still been in the room, but he'd left an hour ago, after a terse "Full report on my desk Monday noon."

Bennet stirred, recrossed his legs. "Angela, where are you living at the moment?"

## Her usual orderly at the retirement home was a spotty-necked youth who wore his white coat as if it had just happened to fall around his shoulders as he wandered the corridors. He dipped into the loose change she kept for telephone

money, but Angie didn't really mind it, not enough to get him fired or even enough to make her hide the coins somewhere else. He was a scruff and a bandit and his name was Waylon but he didn't chatter and his silences were as deep as the Mississippi, and even when she spoke she generally didn't get an answer worth beans.

"Sorry?" he said, as she stopped talking.

"You're not sorry at all, you little shit," she said cheerfully enough. Orderlies were there not so much to listen as to be a passive target for what remained of her wit. "I just mean that when I found love . . . it was in the spaces. In between."

"Between men?" he prompted, puzzled.

"Well, no. Yes. I don't know. And if I went into space, I mean really off to the planets in a rocket, I wouldn't actually want to go anywhere. Space itself would be enough."

"Mmm-hmm, I see," he said. "And you're 70, but you look 90, because —"

"Because I never rest," she said.

"No, I can see that."

"Bastard," she said, but realized with a shock that she'd piqued his interest somehow, though he'd been ignoring her semi-politely for months. He wanted to understand what she was saying, which was something of a surprise. Wrinkled and smelling of wool and Shield and mouthwash, she didn't have much to interest a Waylon.

"Because," she said carefully, "normal people rest, but I don't, really. Other people's breathing spaces are all . . . just part of it, for me. That's when I draw the most charge."

"Vacuum states," he said. "Energy from nothing."

"Ah," said Angela, and sat back. The words weren't right, but from the interstices of his short sentences she realized that he'd understood. The realization made her dizzy.

"Or Buddhism," said Waylon, saying the word so slowly she had to check the wall to make sure he wasn't reading it from some bizarre graffiti. "What appears from emptiness is true existence."

"Phew," she said. "I think I preferred it when you didn't listen to me."

He looked at her in confusion. "That stuff made sense? Jeez. I was just winging it."

"Why do you steal from me, Waylon?"

"Oh," he said. "I . . . look, it was just, it was an emergency. I'll pay you back, honest I will."

"Have a lot of emergencies, don't you?" she said.

Maybe he had his own way. Her way was to draw from the silences, but maybe his private incantations required a steady stream of small silver coins.

"Don't worry," she said, patting his arm. "Just leave me a couple of quarters, in case I have an emergency of my own."

## Four straight hours of this on a sunny Saturday in a room without windows was enough for Stiles. He tapped his watch face, twisted his mouth apologetically. "I need to get going. I told Jane . . ."

"No sweat," said Bennet. "I can give it another hour or so. Then we can pick it up again on Monday, if Angela can make it?"

"I can be here," she said.

Stiles stood, stretched. "Good to meet you, Angela. You have a remarkable gift." The door closed behind him.

Angela and Bennet regarded each other in silence.

Bennet spoke first. "So. What does he really think? Or

*Continued on page 82*



*They say that if you think you might be crazy, then you're not;  
but what happens when everyone else is?*

# PROTOCOLS OF CONSUMPTION

BY ROBERT CHARLES WILSON

*Illustration by Eric Dinyer*

**T**HE QUESTION, NOW AS ALWAYS: DO I BELONG HERE? F-wing invites doubt. You're never quite alone in F-wing, but it's not a place where anyone actually belongs. There are no waiting rooms in F wing, just these barely upholstered chairs scattered along the hallway. Not much in the way of magazines, either. I'd learned to buy my own at the hospital gift shop. *Time*, *Newsweek*: barricades of choice for the antisocial outpatient. But when I saw Mikey Winston rolling toward me with all the grinning momentum of an irresistible force, I knew with a sinking heart that no mere magazine would daunt him.

I didn't know his name at that point. He was only vaguely familiar, a face I'd seen somewhere, not here. Mikey waddled along the corridor in a striped T-shirt that didn't quite meet the waist of his thrift-shop trousers, trouser cuffs turned up over tattered low-top Nikes. Fixed grin, pig-narrow eyes, a high forehead merging into black hair that ran in strings to his dandruff-dusted shoulders. Gray teeth, not a complete set. He found the chair next to me.

"Meds?" he asked.

I put down *Time*. "Pardon me?"

His voice had the penetrating power of a veterinary syringe. "You're here for Dr. Koate, right? Tuesday group, right? New guy?" All those things, Heaven help me.

"So," he said, "what meds are you on?"

I wasn't prepared for this frontal assault. "Lithium," I admitted. "Just lithium?"

Yeah, just. Babe in the woods, me.

"So you're, uh, bipolar?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's nothing much. That's no big deal. I've done Librium, Elavil, Prozac, Paxil . . . a couple of anxiolytics for a while . . . Tofranil for years, but I hated it. Made me sweat. Now I'm on the new one."

"The new one?"

"Thallin. You gotta know about that. New one. Hey, I recognize you," he said.

"Do you?"

"Yeah. What's your name?"

"Zale," I said. "Bob Zale."

"Zeal. Laze."

"What?"

"Anagrams. Zale. Mix up the letters, you know, like the *Jumble* cartoon in the newspaper. You're on the mailbox!"

"Mailbox?"

"In the lobby. We live in the same building. That's where I saw you."

Come to think of it, that was where I'd seen Mikey: a ghost on the stairway, forging his way through drifts of cigarette butts to the lobby mailbox. I live in a four-story brick apartment building on a busy street near Sunnybrook Hospital, the sort of building that houses single mothers, new immigrants working night shifts, recluses, marginal cases of all sorts. My new fraternity.

Mikey introduced himself. "I'm at the other end of the basement! B-13! We're neighbors!"

I was less than overjoyed.

DR. KOATE THOUGHT GROUP WOULD BE GOOD FOR ME, SO I WAS invited to her biweekly 10 AM with a half-dozen of the walking wounded. I won't dwell on this. Suffice to say that I was introduced to Estelle, of the Thorazine twitch and raw-chewed fingers; Mikey, obsessive-compulsive and subject to schizophrenic interludes;

Daniel, who had been arrested while masturbating during the New Year's Eve celebration at Nathan Phillips Square, which must have been a chilly exercise; Kip, a reformed heroin addict and incompletely reformed paranoid, aged 18; and two other women so pathologically withdrawn that I never did learn their names.

Dr. Elizabeth Koate sat in the midst of this zoo, her smile as unflagging as her blouse was neatly pressed. No lab coats in F wing. We're all just folks here. Actually, I admired Dr. Koate's unshakeable calm, her lucid and benevolent presence. I often wondered what it cost her, in emotional terms. Did she go home at night and bite the cat?

She introduced me to the group, or rather encouraged me to introduce myself. I ran down the salient facts. Thirty years old, newly single, ex-electrical engineer (ex several things by now), suffering from a bi polar "mood disorder," as I've been encouraged to think of it, probably since adolescence but only recently diagnosed.

Estelle, the finger-chewer, asked what had finally brought me to therapy.

Every human instinct resists these confessions. Anyway, it was a tricky question. Where do you start? The money wasted senselessly, the suicidal impulses, the drinking binges, the failed marriage?

"My daughter," I said finally.

Dr. Koate gave me a meaningful and gently interested look. "Your daughter told you to go into therapy?"

"No. I went into therapy when I figured out that my daughter was afraid of me."

No further questions.

Dr. Koate asked Mikey how he was responding to his meds. He glowed at the attention. Six months on Thallin, our Mikey, and liking it. "It's not heavy, it doesn't load down the body. Less pushy than Prozac, and I'm not sleepy all the time."

And so around the circle. Prozac, Limbitrol, Elavil, Triavil; Thallin, Thallin. I felt like a novice, a parvenu, with my simple chemical salt, though the list of potential side effects appended to the small brown bottle of Lithotabs has a nicely ominous ring: dry mouth, blurred vision, loss of coordination; in a worst-case scenario, blackouts, blurred speech, seizures, coma.

We psychonauts expect these hazards. They are the tigers in our jungle, the anacondas of our private Amazon.

"Basement at the back," he said, "not bad, close to the laundry

**N**ATURALLY, MIKEY DIDN'T DRIVE. NATURALLY, HE begged a ride with me. Rain came down in torrents, glazing the Sunnybrook parking lot and making even a polite refusal impossible.

Mikey nestled into the passenger seat, exuding his own odd chem-lab smell. Nervous at first, he entertained me by rearranging the letters on the traffic signs. ("Pots! Taxi!") Then, a gambit on my part, we talked about the apartment building. I thought of it as an affordable rat-hole. Mikey claimed to like living there.

room, storage, not bad. Close to the furnace. Warm in winter. Not bad at all."

"The bugs don't bother you?"

"Bugs?"

"The ants."

"Oh, ants. Well, you know, ants — I don't mind 'em."

The building was a unique property. The problem wasn't cockroaches, though I had found one or two prospecting the bathroom walls, but ants. They boiled up from under the basement floorboards, ignored all propriety, invaded shoes, clothing, sleeping bodies. I had cracked a kind of armed truce by way of liberal applications of Reach 'n Crevice Raid, which was probably contaminating my food and causing my testicles to shrink. I told Mikey I'd complained to the superintendent. Mikey was unexpectedly upset.

"Mr. Saffka, Mr. Saffka, he won't do anything. Maybe put down more roach powder in the halls. Make life difficult. Did you *have* to complain?"

"Yeah, I think I did."

"Make life more difficult. I'll talk to them."

"Who, the ants?"

But Mikey didn't answer.

MY EX-WIFE CORINNA HAD BEEN GRANTED CUSTODY OF OUR daughter Emily in the divorce settlement. I hadn't contested the issue. I trusted Corinna, I didn't trust myself, and in any event I knew what the courts would make of a male parent with bad debts and a psychiatric condition.

I told Mikey goodbye and retreated to my own apartment — a "bachelor" apartment, or more accurately a closet with a toilet. There was e-mail from Em. Bless the Internet for letting me exchange these semaphores with my daughter, ions darting between two synapses in the World Brain. Em, 12 years old, had mastered the electronic mysteries. Her note was chatty and peppered with happy-face emoticons.

Her class had gone on a field trip to the Humber River Valley — one of those glorious late-May rock-turning expeditions, I gathered. Many and various small things lived in the pitch-black riverside muck: water-striders, mayflies, eggs and larvae and protozoa. Em was excited because she'd found a rock with the image of a trilobite frozen in it. "It is even older than you, Dad! :-)"

The river of time, I told her in a return note, is the oldest river of all, rich with life. Em was my contribution to that river, my own ripple in the stream: I the sinking stone, Em the perfect golden wave shimmering in the sunlight.

(Dr. Koate calls this kind of thinking "fatalistic" and wants me to avoid it.)

We arranged to meet on the weekend; brunch at McDonald's and maybe a movie in the afternoon. Saturday was my regular day with Em. Lately she had stopped cringing at the sight of me, and for that thank Lithium, thank Dr. Koate, thank even biweekly group.

Which left only the evening to kill. Bless television, while we're counting our blessings. Television talks to you when there's no human voice but your own, when your own voice is an abusive whine that hums in your head like a dynamo. God bless lithium and Raid and cable TV, and God bless me, if I should wake before I die.

I WORK FOUR DAYS A WEEK AT A DOWNTOWN use book shop, shelving and stocking and making sales for the obese owner, who lives upstairs with his collection of brocaded smoking jackets and his Oscar Wilde first editions. His last employee had gone mad or fled to the wilds of British Columbia, depending on which version of the story the boss chose to tell. Either scenario had begun to seem plausible.

Holding a job means keeping regular hours, unfortunately. Mikey learned when to look for me in the building's tiny lobby. Usually I could forestall his hints and invitations with a wave or a complaint about how busy I was, perhaps the world's most pathetic lie. But Mikey had the doggedness of a true obsessive-compulsive.

I came home Thursday too tired to fend him off and accepted the offer of coffee at his apartment. "Good!" he exclaimed. "Hey, fine! Roll out the red carpet!"

Mikey may or may not be capable of sarcasm — I've never been sure.

He turned the key in his lock — he had locked his apartment even for a stroll down the corridor — with the manner of a bank president cracking a vault. A peculiar odor wafted out as he opened the door, the acrid smell of ancient laundry and unaired rooms, but under that a cloying sweetness, as if he had spilled a jar of honey. I



drew a precautionary breath and stepped inside.

The obsessive-compulsive is doomed to display his mania. Mikey, at least, was an orderly o-c. The floor was naked parquet, the sofa and chair shabby but positioned symmetrically: I was certain the distance to each adjacent wall would match within a millimeter. There were no visible books except for a set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in relentless order on a shelf.

And bugs. Insects, rather. Mikey was an amateur entomologist, or at least a bug collector. The specimens framed and mounted on the walls were nothing exotic, only what you might find on the streets any average summer: June bugs, ladybugs, cicadas; even cockroaches, centipedes, silverfish. Creatures more often scraped off the sole of a shoe than admired.

But I admired them, or at least pretended to. Mikey, for once, was unresponsive, wouldn't talk about his collection, just measured coffee by the level teaspoonful into an immaculately washed percolator and whistled nervously to himself. When we sat down on his clean, but ragged, ancient sofa all he wanted to talk about was Dr. Koate and the group.

Mikey admired Dr. K. "She's a genius. Good with meds. Best meds of any doctor. You're still just doing lithium, right?"

"That's all I need, Mikey."

"Don't be so sure." He tapped his shining forehead. "Things hide. It's a complicated system. Serotonin, epinephrine, norepinephrine, dopamine: every brain cell like a gun with a thousand bullets, a thousand fingers on a thousand triggers. Brain cells talk in chemistry, did you know that?" His coffee cup rattled on his knee. "Like insects. Pheromones. Hormones. Chemicals. The same way insects talk. Like in an ant hill or a bee hive, little chemical messages, it's the first kind of communication, the most basic."

"I'm OK with the lithium."

"An elementary salt."

"It gets the job done."

"Our problem is communication. A little Prozac, a little Thallin, it gets the cells talking. They communicate in new ways. Lithium just, you know, damps things down."

This was oppressive, and so was Mikey's apartment, its junk-store sterility and sealed windows, its dry and overheated air. "I have to go."

Mikey took my cup, placed it next to his on the kitchen counter, symmetrically.

"The whole Earth is full of messages," he said brightly.

I watched an ant cross the countertop, probing our empty cups for whatever messages we had left there.

PICKING UP A DAUGHTER FROM THE HOME OF AN ESTRANGED WIFE: always a comedy of humiliation.

"OK. Sure." The difficult part about being a manic-depressive-in-



EM WAS PLAYING IN THE BACK YARD WHEN I ARRIVED. Corinna took me into the kitchen. From the window I could see my daughter rolling her Barbie camper among the tall weeds by the fence.

"I'd like her back by 4:30," Corinna said. "Early supper. And she has a social studies project due Monday."

remission is that one inhabits the ruins of a life. The lens of sanity is merciless. Around Corinna I was reduced to the role of penitent, sinned-against and humbled and hair-shirted.

Corinna is a short, compact, dark-haired woman, an accountant for a Bay Street firm, devastatingly good-looking when she isn't encased in her professional armor. She smiled, a good sign, and asked how I was doing.

"Even keel," I said.

"Still taking the lithium?"

"I don't think that's going to change."

"Is it still working for you?"

"More or less."

This was leading up to a confession. "I've been getting some counseling myself." There was a defiant note in her voice, as if she expected me to mock her for the decision. God help me, there might have been a time when I would have. (Seeing people flinch from me has become a mode of recognition, like seeing one's own scarred face in a mirror.)

I said, "Does it help?"

"Well, I think so. I like my shrink. She wants me to consider medication."

"Medication?"

"Just an antidepressant. Prozac, probably, or Thallin. What do you think?"

I understood that she wanted an opinion from someone already "on meds," an insider. I said, weakly, "Whatever works for you, Corinna. There's no guarantee with this sort of thing."

"No, I know. It's just been kind of hard lately, keeping everything together, with Em's school and all."

"Trouble at school?"

"She won't sit still. Talks over the teacher. Kid stuff, really, but the school nurse has been using the H-word. Hyperactivity. Or Attention-Deficit Disorder."

"Em's not hyperactive."

"You get different manifestations of ADD. At least, that's what they tell me."

"She's just restless."

"She won't keep quiet in class, apparently."

Not my Em, I thought. My Em is a quiet, thoughtful little girl. Sullen, occasionally, and sometimes moody or maybe that's just the effect I have on her.

SHE PICKED UP HER BARBIE CAMPER AND SHOOK A DOZEN LADYBUGS OUT THE BACK. They flew off like tourists evicted from a tour bus. Em looked at me brightly. "What movie are we seeing?"

We saw *James and the Giant Peach* at a review theater. Em had seen it on videotape, but she enjoyed the popcorn and the big-screen ambience. She laughed at the right places but seemed thoughtful, afterward, in the car. "Real bugs don't act like that," she said. "Well, I mean, of course they don't, but what they really do is a lot more interesting."

The combined physical weight of all the insects on Earth, Em said, outweighed all other living things put together. "Think of all that," she said, "all hidden under the dirt or inside things. All those insects, talking to each other."

"They can talk?"

"To each other," Em said firmly. "Not like in the movie. They talk with chemicals."

The cell phone buzzed. Corinna, asking how we'd like the movie.

I said we'd liked it fine.

"Good. Great. Listen. I know I said I wanted Em back early —"

"We're on the way."

"Well, would it be OK if you kept her little longer? For the evening, maybe?"

It took me a moment to work out the implication. "Date, Corinna?"

"Just a chance to get out of the house. I mean, if it's all right with you, if you don't have other plans."

"No plans. I'd be happy to spend an evening with Em. When do you want her back?"

"By 10, say? If I'm not here I'll have Natalie put her to bed."

"Natalie?"

"The teenager next door. Babysitter. Is 10 all right?"

"Sounds fine."

Em was silent, listening.

COMES A TIME WHEN COINCIDENCE IS HEAPED UPON COINCIDENCE until the mind screams: *Pattern*, for Christ's sake, there's a *pattern* here. Maybe if I'd reached that point sooner — No, that's bad thinking. Depressive thinking. I have to be linear about this. Coherent. Objective.

I MADE DINNER IN MY MINUSCULE KITCHEN, HAMBURGERS AND baked potatoes for Em and me. While she waited for the food she cruised cake, finally abandoned the remote and settled down with a *Goosebumps* book. Not my idea of hyperactivity, and are ADD kids usually such attentive readers?

She seemed to enjoy dinner, though she complained about the lack of ketchup. She went to the refrigerator for a Coke, took a glass from the cupboard, paused to inspect the bottle of Lithotabs I'd left on the counter. "Is this your medicine?"

"Yup."

"Looks different from mine."

"From yours? What medicine are you taking, pumpkin?"

"Ritalin. At school. Little round yellow pills."

Ritalin is the brand name for methylphenidate, a central nervous system stimulant often prescribed for kids with Attention-Deficit Disorder. Helps the brain cells talk to each other, Mikey would have said. A talk-talk chemical. I was bothered by the idea of someone modifying my daughter's brain chemistry without my knowledge or permission, perhaps even without Corinna's. "I guess the school nurse gives you Ritalin."

"Uh-huh."

"Did she clear this with Mom?"

"Yeah."

I sat at the table and regarded my daughter: her golden hair askew, her nails still dark with back-yard dirt because she'd forgotten to wash her hands before dinner. "So do you think the Ritalin helps?"

"I don't want to talk about it." She looked at me solemnly. "Can we rent a videotape tonight?"

Days passed. I quizzed Corinna about the Ritalin and she con-



AYS PASSED. I QUIZZED CORINNA ABOUT THE RITALIN AND she confessed to signing a permission form. "She takes a minimal dose, and it hasn't harmed her in any way. Helped, if anything. Her grades are up and her teacher has stopped complaining. If I notice any kind of side effect I'll take her off it, of course."

fessed to signing a permission form. "She takes a minimal dose, and it hasn't harmed her in any way. Helped, if anything. Her grades are up and her teacher has stopped complaining. If I notice any kind of side effect I'll take her off it, of course."

"You should have told me."

"I almost did — you know, when you came to pick her up."

"But?"

"But I wasn't sure how you'd react."

"I don't throw things any more, Corinna."

"Old habits die hard."

Hers or mine? My emotional volatility or her conditioned flinch? Either way, my fault. One night last year, unemployed, drunk, nearly suicidal, I had come home and demolished the kitchen. I broke bottles, trashed the microwave, threw a full jug of Javex through the French doors. Creating, of course, one of those memories that throbs periodically like an old war wound. Chilling forever any impulse Corinna might have once possessed to confide in me.

And frightening Em, who had stood in the kitchen doorway twisting her nightgown in her small fists, crying soundlessly.

I had described the scene to Dr. Koate a few months ago. Dr. Koate listened with barely a furrowing of her thoughtful brow. "Your remorse is appropriate," she had said. "But you mustn't let it lock

you in place. Apologize and move on."

I appreciated Dr. Koate's advice, but what I really liked about her was her cool receptivity — her implacable, wise smile, as if she were privy to some ancient wisdom of the Earth.

MIKEY'S FONDNESS FOR THALLIN BEGAN TO FADE. COINCIDENTALLY, upbeat stories about the drug were suddenly everywhere: newspapers, TV. It was the psychiatric miracle Prozac had only hinted at, an antidepressant that was also an anxiolytic and antipsychotic and reducing pill and sleep aid, and safer than salt. Your basic all-round medicine for melancholy.

But Mikey was backsliding, and that was obvious at the next Tuesday group. He looked unhealthy and withdrawn. He hadn't washed his hair in recent memory; his skin was sallow, his teeth the color of chipped and weathered ivory. When Dr. Koate asked him how he was doing, he hesitated and then launched into one of his monologues.

"Whenever they find something new, something powerful, they always think it's medicine. But they're wrong."

"Who are they, Mikey?"

"Scientists. Doctors. Did you know, Dr. K., that when they brought back tobacco from the New World lots of Europeans thought it was a medicine? There was a guy invented a machine, he went around pumping tobacco smoke up the rear ends of the crowned heads of Europe. As medicine! That's a true story, you can look it up. And radium! That guy Kellogg, the Cornflake guy, he had a sanatorium back at the turn of the century where he made people breathe in radium gas, for a cure! But it's a force of nature, Christ, radium, it's atoms decaying, matter turning into energy, radiation, tumors, disease!"

"That was a long time ago, Mikey."

"They poured x-rays into people's feet, just to figure out their shoe size!"

"Perhaps that's true, but —"

"But you think I should talk about me. But I am, Dr. K. This is about me."

"In what way, Mikey?"

He hung his head. "Thallin."

"Thallin isn't radium. It isn't radioactive."

"Not just Thallin. All those chemicals we dump all the time, dioxin, methoprene, you get those frogs in Michigan with two heads or one eye or six legs, you get alligators in Florida with no testicles, you get birds dying out because their eggs are soft as Jello. Because there's no such thing as just a chemical, Dr. K. I read all about this. The planet is talking to itself, the planet has been talking to itself for a million years, and chemicals are the language, and we keep dumping weird messages into the dirt, the rivers — into our own bodies!"

"Do you think the Thallin is bad for you?"

"That's not the problem!"

"Let's not shout at each other."

"Good, bad, that's not the problem! The problem is messages, don't you get it? All these chemicals are fake messages, bad letters, words all scrambled up! If you could listen you'd hear trees talking, flowers, insects, they talk in chemicals as complicated as anything you can cook up in a laboratory, but we're killing their language, and it's our language, too, the oldest language, body language, and it's written in dopamine, serotonin, testosterone, estrogen, a million chemicals that don't even have names!"

"We could consider a different medication. That might be a good idea."

"You're not listening!"

"Maybe we should listen to each other, Mikey."

"Everything's talking to everything else, every chemical is a word or a sentence or a book, but what are we saying, Dr. Koate? Nobody knows — that's what scares me!"

Dr. Koate let a silence fall, a reverberant and calming silence. Then

she spoke. "Mikey has concerns about his medication. Would anyone else like to share some thoughts on this?"

LEFT, AS POLITELY AS POSSIBLE, AHEAD OF THE OTHER OUT-patients, made my way quickly down the F-wing corridor, past the nursing station and the pastel watercolor prints in protective glass, past academic offprints posted on the bulletin board like souvenirs: *SSRI Interaction at 5-HT<sub>2</sub> Receptor Sites, Dopamine Depletion and Renal Function in Chronic Schizophrenia*. Past the pharmacy, auditorium, lunch cart, at last into the open air. Into a fine, early-summer noon.

Mikey reached the car ahead of me.

"Zeal," he muttered. "Laze."

I sighed. "Need a ride, Mikey?"

"OK."

He filled the car with the stink of his sweat-drenched clothing, acrid and terrible. Mikey wasn't shy about his pheromones. I rolled my window down. "Where'd you learn all that stuff, Mikey?"

"What stuff?"

"Hormones, chemicals, all that jazz."

"I can read," he said sullenly. Then: "First-year biology. The endocrine system. Plus stuff in the newspapers."

"You went to university?"

"For a year. I'm not stupid." He pouted like an infant. "I wasn't always like this."

And I understood that Mikey, in his lucid moments, knew that some terrible and debilitating condition had overtaken him, that he had fallen from the sunny aristocracy of the sane into that twilight world whose citizens might mumble or scream but seldom communicate. As if he had wandered into a hidden city of tenements and madhouses and couldn't find his way out.

(I know that city, Mikey. Look: Here are its windowless walls and fog-shrouded towers; here is the rust-scabbed WELCOME sign; here are the mossy cobbles under my own weary feet.)

HE WAS QUIET FOR THE REST OF THE RIDE, QUIET UNTIL WE PULLED into the building's tiny parking lot. I parked and turned off the ignition. Mikey opened his door a crack, then paused and looked back at me.

"You be careful," he said. "Don't attract attention. Don't trust Dr. K. — she's not what she seems. And tell Em to be careful, too."

"What?"

He shrugged and moved to leave the car.

"Mikey," I said. "Wait."

"Thanks for the ride and all —"

"Mikey. Get back in here and shut that fucking door."

He froze. "Don't yell at me."

"You said to tell Em to be careful."

"Yeah."

"Do you mean my daughter? Is that who you mean?"

"Emily. The little girl."

"I don't recall introducing you to Emily. I don't recall mentioning her name." In fact I kept those two worlds scrupulously separate: my family, Tuesday group. I would never have mentioned Em to Mikey or vice versa. "How do you know Emily?"

"Maybe the ants told me."

"I don't want to hear that. No more crazy shit, Mikey: are you spying on me?"

"Just tell her to be careful!" He sprang out of the car and then leaned back inside, his damp hair hanging in strings across his brick-red face. His breath smelled like the air that wafts from trash cans on hot August afternoons. "I don't owe you anything,

Mr. Fucking Big-Shot Zale!"

"Stay away from my family, Mikey."

"Fuck your family!"

He slammed the door and scurried away.

I PHONED CORINNA. NO ANSWER, BUT maybe she was still at work. I waited an hour, gazing vaguely at CNN and wondering what the limits of Mikey's psychosis might be. He was unhappy with his meds, had probably stopped taking Thallin, and he was capable of anger: he had demonstrated that.

Another call. This time Corinna picked up the phone. Suddenly I was in the position of admitting that I might have attracted the attention of a lunatic, that the lunatic might be stalking Em. I started by describing Mikey

and asking Corinna whether she'd seen anyone like that recently.

"No," she said.

"You sure? This could be important."

"Well, not somebody *new*, anyway. It does sound kind of like Mikey Winston."

I gripped the phone. "You know him?"

"Heck, everybody on the street knows Mikey. He does yardwork, rakes leaves, that kind of thing. I gather it's what he does for a living, though it can't be much of one. He's retarded or something."

"Not exactly."

"So what's this all about?"

"Maybe just the long arm of coincidence. Corinna, did you hire Mikey?"

"He straightens up around the property once a month or so. Mowed the lawn for me last weekend. He's slow, but he's meticulous, and he charges half of what the professional services charge. The front yard looks practically vacuumed — I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

"Does Em know him?"

"To wave at, I guess. Hey, you're starting to scare me. Is there something I should know about Mikey?"

"How long has he been working for you?"

"Off and on, maybe six months. Since January, anyway. I remember he shovelled snow after that big storm."

January. Well before I ran into him in F wing. Mikey must have seen me at the house one weekend and made the connection.

(I recognize you, Mikey had said when we met.)

Which meant I had accused him groundlessly. Worse, I'd made it obvious that I thought of him as a leper, a subhuman whose company I might be forced to keep, but who was too unclean to meet my family.

Just what Mikey needed when his medication was failing.

"Hey," Corinna said. "Are you still there?"

"Still here."

"Anything wrong?"

"Nope. But I owe somebody an apology."

Story of my life.

MIKEY WASN'T HOME, BUT HIS DOOR, UNUSUALLY, WAS UNLOCKED and ajar. It drifted open when I knocked.

"Mikey?"

I stepped inside, then closed the door behind me when I heard heavy footsteps from the basement stairwell. When I squinted out Mikey's peep-hole into the corridor I saw Mr. Saffka, our aging superintendent, shaking roach powder onto the hallway carpet. He wore rubber gloves and a hardware-store respirator.

Mikey must have left in a hurry. There were papers scattered over his parquet floor, as if he had filled a pad of typewriter paper and torn out the pages one after the other.

I picked one up.

THALLIN, it said at the top, and in the center of the otherwise blank page, this:

ANT  
H  
A A  
ANTHILL  
ANTHILL  
A THALLIN  
ANTHILL N  
ANTHILL  
THALLIN  
ILL  
L  
ILL

I looked at several more pages, each with similar cryptic anagrams, messages struggling to emerge from the noise inside Mikey's head. I found this:

THE RED QUEEN  
THE RED ANT  
QUEEN EMILY  
ANTY EM

And on the sheet beneath it:

PROZAC  
ELAVIL  
AMITRIPTYLINE  
za el mylie  
my zeal lie  
lie lazy em  
zale emily  
EMILY ZALE

HERE IS A LITANY FOR DR. KOATE, SHOULD SHE EVER READ THIS.  
Here are some things I know: some sane and sober facts.

I know insects don't talk to each other.

I know insects don't talk to Mikey Winston.

I know there is not a vast, slow conversation taking place between the human and the invertebrate world.

I know that dioxin and methoprine and serotonin and fluoxetine are not dialects, words, syllables, or signifiers in a global chemical language.

And I know — give me credit, Dr. Koate — that insects don't develop pharmaceuticals for Pfizer or Eli Lilly, even though insect pheromones are a hot new source of bioactive drugs and tweakable molecules such as Thallin.

See, Dr. Koate? No hedging. No doubts. I don't need the new meds.

I BARRELLED OUT OF MIKEY'S APARTMENT PAST MR. SAFFKA, WHO gaped at me, eyes wide above his respirator, like a startled June bug. Ran for the car.

The afternoon light was getting long, but the air was warm and full of early-summer smells: fresh leaves, mown lawns, diesel exhaust from the growling Bayview buses. Traffic, thank God, wasn't bad. It was a quick drive to Corinna's house, what I still sometimes thought of as "our house."

We had bought it during one of my rare prosperous years, when interest rates plummeted after the '87 stock market adjustment, and even so it was mortgaged to the teeth. It backed onto a ravine; we had rear-window views of forest and a quaint pedestrian bridge.

Corinna was all smiles when she answered the door. The first giddy flush of a Prozac prescription, I guessed. I asked her if she'd seen Mikey.

"What is this about Mikey Winston? Are you stalking him or something?"

Or maybe she'd been drinking. "Corinna, it's probably nothing. Is Em at home?"

"Just home from school. She's playing in the back yard. This isn't your day with her, though."

"I just want to say hi to her." Reassure myself? Warn her?

"OK," Corinna said dubiously, "but —"

A voice from inside the house: "Corrie? What's up?"

Male voice.

"I can't ask you to stay for dinner," Corinna finished.

"That's OK." Everything's OK with me. I'm an OK kind of guy.

"But you can say hello to Em if you want." She frowned. "And explain this to me sometime, all right?"

I promised I would.

I went around back. The house shadowed the yard. The cedar fences I had installed a few years ago were starting to look shabby. The lawn could have used work, too, but I guessed that was Mikey's department.

Emily was nowhere visible. But the back gate was standing open.

THE GATE OPENED ONTO A TRAIL, A KID TRAIL LEADING GENTLY down past birches and silver maples into the deeper shadows of the ravine. We had taught Em to stay out of the ravine on general principles, but it wasn't known to be dangerous; Corinna used the trail for jogging when weather permitted. Farther downslope there were paved city trails, wooden stairs, kilometer distances posted for dedicated runners.

The woods were deep. Young plants had covered last year's mulch. Anything off the trail was a tangle of old and new life. The spring had been warm and wet; undergrowth crowded the margin of the path; mushrooms thrived on the scabbed trunks of fallen trees. There was nothing human to see: No joggers today, no furtive teenage couples. Almost as if the woods had been evacuated; as if a warning sign had been posted. No trespassing. Here there be tygers. Keep out — this means you.

I called for Emily. Odd how tentative, how lost, a human voice can sound, even a few yards into the woods. The tall trees creaked and whispered among themselves. I called again.

There seemed to be an answer this time: a muted sound, choked but human — too deep, I thought, to be Emily's voice, but frightening in its inarticulate panic. Maybe an animal; a raccoon, say, sick or wounded. Or maybe not. I hurried down the path calling Emily's name, pausing to listen for a response.

The path forked into blind alleys, doubled around glacial boulders, paralleled the creek at the bottom of the ravine but seemed never to approach it. Gnats hovered between the trees in blinding clouds.

I found a shoe at one crook in the path — a girl's shoe, scuffed but fresh, leather still shiny, and it looked familiar, but was it Em's? I couldn't be sure.

Then I heard the muffled cry again, much closer now. I had doubled back on myself without realizing it: I was approaching Corinna's house from the south, up-slope. I saw the cedar fence directly above me.

A willow grew where the slope eased out to an escarpment; its branches reached almost to the trail, enclosing the space around the trunk as neatly as a tent. Concealment, I thought. Camouflage. Other people must have thought so, too. There was a flurry of ancient condoms and crumpled cigarette packs among the fallen leaves.

I didn't call for Em again. Every instinct demanded stealth. I parted the willow branches like a hunter.

More gnats fluttered against my face; then flies, dozens of them, hard as raisins, bumping toward the light.

I cannot describe the smell under that shadowed tree: acrid, sharp, bitter, earthy . . . *overwhelming*. My eyes adjusted to the dim green nimbus. I made out two human figures.

Human. Approximately.

I WON'T HEDGE THIS, DR. KOATE. THERE'S NO POINT IN LYING, AS you've said so often yourself. I'll try to be objective. Dispassionate. Two human figures, both swarming with flies, with ants.

But not corpses. They were alive.

One lay on the ground, writhing, mouth choked with insects, breathing stertorously. Mouth open and — well, full.

The other figure stood above the first with apparent complacency, apparently watching; but this figure, too, was covered in a skin of crawling insects, covered so deeply that I couldn't distin-

*Continued on page 81*

# A huntress who is hunted. A woman who is wolf. A life that is legend.

An epic of the historical  
and fantastical.

**R**egeane is a shapeshifter, a being of preternatural agility and strength. Possessed of her mother's royal blood, she is destined to be a pawn in the power struggle between kings Charlemagne and Deserderous. But it is the inherited blood of her murdered father that shapes her destiny in darker, more wondrous ways....



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*Jim Burns walks the fine line  
between artistic and commercial art.*

# IMAGES BURNED IN OUR MIND

BY KAREN HABER

**I**t's impossible for me to be objective when it comes to Jim Burns' artwork. Not only has he painted wonderful covers for my own science fiction novels, he's had a long and very pleasing association with my husband as well, painting many covers for his books, most recently *Sorcerers of Majipoor*, (HarperPrism). His original paintings hang in our house. Obviously I think his work is special, and I'm not alone: so do the legions of fans who award him Hugos and buy his original paintings, and the art directors on both sides of the Atlantic who keep his painting schedule packed with assignments.

What hooks us first is Jim's deep engagement with the work. It's obvious that here is an artist who not only reads each manuscript carefully but actually enjoys it and enters fully into the world it presents.

His visual inventiveness makes each Burns painting a journey of discovery. His cinematic sense of composition draws us into the work while his treatment of texture and color guarantees that we'll stick around. The artist's trademark baroque organic touches, with their antique and art-historical references, are an added incentive to keep looking. Even his machinery has a rococo anthropomorphic feel, as if it's about to morph into some strange and provocative new life form.

There are no hard angles to a painting by Jim Burns. It's as though he's wedded art nouveau to super realism: Everything — and everyone — looks sleek, sexy, slippery, and built for speed. Even his knights in armor glow from a private power source. And yet their armor may be so highly decorated that it appears not merely engraved but embroidered. A paradox of Jim's work is its depiction of delicacy balanced against massive power.

His tendency to create fully realized compositions that stand alone (i.e., without adequate "headspace" for the titles) has occasionally resulted in the obliteration of much rich Burnsian detail by the title of the book. That's





British artist Jim Burns mixes original touches with antique references for Robert Silverberg's *Sorcerers of Majipoor*.





why it's such a treat to see his original paintings at convention art shows and discover what we've been missing.

This certainly was the case for me when I saw the original painting for *Sorcerers of Majipoor* at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow a few years ago. I was stunned by the sheer beauty — and scale — of the piece and the lush use of paint. By the artist's treatment of the marvelous foliage that runs across the painting. Stunned, too, by the masterful handling of white-on-white seen in the two-headed Su-Suheris set against the intriguing marble lizard throne. The way the flesh tones (ahem) pop out, especially in the case of the pulchritudinous princess lurking behind the vine. I even savored the vine itself: the way each glassy

stamen held a spot of white reflected light within its Byzantine purple depths.

And, of course, there was the illusion of depth and three-dimensionality to consider, and the use of receding space. The graceful treatment of monumentality. The subtle deployment of hue and tint, of luminescence. The seamless plasticity of objects.

Jim's engagement with the work begins as he pores over each raw manuscript. "As I read," he says, "I tend to [make check marks] as I go along, noting scenes that have obvious potential, descriptions, and so on. At the end I have a filmic, very visual, image of the book. I try to freeze-frame elements and then work up a sketch from what seem to be appropriate incidents."

He works long hours, seven days a week,

revising as he goes. But he does little preliminary sketching, preferring to edit the piece itself, "sculpting" the paint. Asked if he thinks that he brings an artistic approach to the cold-eyed business of commercial illustration, he agrees. "I think that I constantly tread a rather awkward line between artistic and commercial."

His first steps toward that balancing act were taken in his boyhood in Wales, where Jim was so infatuated with comic-strip images of military hardware, primarily planes and tanks and — even better — tanks that were planes, that he began to sketch his own interpretations. He dreamed of flight and his childhood obsession led to his joining the Royal Air Force when he was 18. Jim actually soloed a few times before he decided

In *Sword-Born*, by Jennifer Roberson, Burns was asked to "lace-up" the woman's shirt. TOP RIGHT: For Kate Elliott's *Jaran*, Burns' majestic architecture to creates a fantastic landscape. BELOW: A grand castle skirts the edge of a cliff on the cover of Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Border Lands*.



that his adventures with hardware should be confined to the ground—and canvas. Following a stint in art college, he embarked upon a career as a professional illustrator in 1972, and a long-term relationship with the airbrush. But his experience with machines that could—even briefly—defy gravity had marked him for good.

Although his paintings vary in subject and treatment, he is always totally immersed in the work. This obsessive artistic approach has occasionally taken him over the cliff of a deadline. A case in point: the covers for the British edition of George R.R. Martin's novel *A Game of Thrones* (Bantam).

"There are certain notions of fantasy covers," Jim says, "very decorative, filled with information. I was looking for a way to tart



up the cover a bit more and I'd been terribly impressed with veneers at the time. So I thought, why not add wood to the painting? Well, I quickly discovered that inlay is the most time-consuming, ridiculously pointless exercise. It took forever. And as book jackets, the effect is mostly lost. But I didn't see the potential pitfall. I try to maintain a certain ambience when doing a series of covers to keep them linked, so once I'd done it for the first one I'm obliged to do it for each one. So I'm a bloody fool. And, at the end of the day, I'm left with these inlaid paintings. My agent said, 'If they were mine, I'd just screw legs into them and call them coffee tables.'"

His latest obsession may rescue him from future pitfalls of this nature: Jim is currently familiarizing himself with the artistic possi-

bilities of a Mac computer with a 21-inch screen, a scanner, and Photoshop software.

"I think one has to embrace the computer as an exciting new tool in the studio," he says. "I get the same sense of excitement with it as I did the first couple of years I was working as a professional and discovered the airbrush."

"Photoshop is really built for somebody like me. I see the distinct parallels to the painting process without the mess. It's so flexible, and you never have to clean out an airbrush or replace the needle. It's brilliant. In a way I find it easier to conjure up what I see in my mind's eye on the computer than in paint. It's amazingly editable, like sculpting in pixels. And in a way that's how I work: I shovel paint around, building up the image."

Another good reason for turning on the

computer: Jim claims to be developing "airbrush thumb." After years of using the thing, I'm paying the price with a very specific sort of tendonitis.

Conspicuously absent from the Burns oeuvre is gory horror. But it's not from any particular choice on the artist's part. "There are certain things I'm good at and those kind of assignments tend to come my way. I'm game for most things but there are technical limits to what I can do. I'm happy working on the 'quietly horrific.' I rarely do blatant horror but it's not from any particular squeamishness on my part."

If he has any hesitation over subject matter, it has more to do with health issues than splatter: "About the only time where I refused an assignment on moral grounds



was when I was asked to make a painting for a tobacco advertisement.

"I really have no artistic temperament. Some people get very peeved at having their artistic creations messed about with. I'm a commercial artist, not a tortured soul struggling for personal expression."

With amusement, Jim recalls, "For *Sword-Born*, by Jennifer Roberson (DAW), I revealed what I thought would be a very decent hint of cleavage, nothing too extreme. Well, eventually I was asked to sort of lace up her shirt. And I did."

The richness of his imagination, his unusual artistic sensibility, and his enthusiasm as a fan of fantastic literature gives his work an undeniable added dimension. But one really needs to see the entire painting to

take in the unexpected details. Which brings me to a pet peeve: We're really overdue for a retrospective book of his work. The last one, *Lightship*, is over 10 years — and 200 paintings — out of date. Perhaps we can look forward to a new one, Jim hints. What else does the future hold? According to Jim, bright colors and digital art applications.

"Originally I was less adventurous with color, but in recent years I've tried to be much much bolder with use of color. I still think I can improve on my own technique. I really want to keep on moving in new directions and trying new things, and certainly color is one of them. I tend to blast away with Cadmium red and Cadmium orange. And perhaps, soon, I'll be doing my blasting digitally." ■

*FAR LEFT: For Dave Duncan's The Cutting Edge, the first book in the Handful of Men series, Burns' art illustrates multiple episodes and emotions. ABOVE: Burns painted this cover for the British edition of Robert Silverberg's Gilgamesh the King, an adaptation of the ancient Sumerian epic, in 1984.*

*Faith, hope, sacrifice — these can be powerful weapons  
against a world of uncertainties and fear.*

# STEEL PENNY

BY JANNI LEE SIMNER

*Illustration by Janet Aulisio*

THE NIGHT JANE'S FATHER LEFT, HE SAID TO HER, "Penny for your thoughts," and held her in that gaze she knew so well: solemn on the surface, but with a current of laughter running below. Jane tried to smile, but her own face, as she stared back, held no laughter at all. She could only think about how her father was leaving, for Europe and the War, and might never return again.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. "Payment now," he said, the laughter bubbling up into his eyes. The thoughts you can send in your letters. Don't forget."

Jane watched him drop the coin into her hands. It wasn't made of copper, the way pennies were supposed to be, but out of polished steel. Copper, like so much else, was needed for the War. Jane traced the year: 1943. She turned the coin over, again and again, until it was slick with her sweat.

Her mother stepped into the room, holding the baby, Mary, in her arms. Jane knew, then, that it was time for her father to leave. She opened her mouth to say something, anything, but her throat felt dry, stuffed with cotton. She let the coin drop into a pocket of her dress, and her mother put the baby in her arms. Jane stumbled a little beneath the weight, then steadied herself.

"I'm walking your father into town." Her mother's voice sounded harsher — and more tired — than usual. "To the train."

"Promise you'll look after your sister," her father said. Jane nodded, accepting the promise without words. Her father reached out and grabbed her and Mary both in a swift hug. Jane leaned in close, breathing the musty smell of his shirt, memorizing the feel of his arms, strong from bringing in the autumn harvest.

Too soon he let go and walked across the living room, with its battered old couch, scarred wooden table, and comfortable creaking rocking chair. Still holding Mary, Jane followed, as did her mother. Her father opened the door and Jane looked past him, to mountains bright with red and yellow leaves, into a chill evening full of golden clouds and heavy with the tang of woodsmoke.

Her mother gripped her father's hand tightly, as if they were no more than children themselves. Without another word they stepped together into the night, pulling the door shut behind them.

"Goodbye," Jane whispered, finding words at last, too late for her father to hear. For a long time she stared at the closed door,

at the peeling paint she knew so well.

Mary began fidgeting in Jane's arms, tugging at her locket, pulling at her hair. Jane sighed and turned from the door to walk around the room, rocking the baby back and forth. She stopped at a window and peered outside. The sky was midnight blue now, leaves fading into night. Jane pressed her nose against the glass, lifted Mary up so she could look as well, but her parents were out of sight, gone around a bend in the dirt road that led to town. Soon, Jane knew, her mother would return along that road, alone.

She walked silently to the couch, setting the baby down on one of the worn cushions. Then Jane curled up, as if she were much younger than her 11 years, buried her head in the skirt of her dress, and quietly started to cry.

Perhaps because she was crying she didn't notice, at first, when the wind began outside, rustling the leaves like dry paper. It grew louder, rattling the closed windows in their old wooden frames. That Jane did hear, and she hugged herself tightly, wishing the wind would go away. Her father always told her, during storms, that the old house had survived more than a hundred years of bad weather, and would surely last a hundred more. But he wasn't here now, and the house didn't feel nearly as sturdy as before.

The wind began to howl, shaking the windows more fiercely than ever. Somewhere there was a crack, like thunder. The baby wailed; the electric lights flickered and went out. Something crashed against the door, with the sound of splintering wood. Jane leaped to her feet. Her sobs caught in her throat; she swallowed hard. She'd promised to take care of her sister, but she had no idea what she'd do if the storm chose tonight to break through the hundred-year-old walls.

Another crash, and the door flew open, letting the whistling wind into the room. Jane screamed. Mary cried louder. The curtains lashed back and forth like angry ghosts. A curtain rod flew free, smashing against the far wall.

Jane grabbed the baby into her arms and ran, through the narrow hallway, into the kitchen. The fire in the wood-burning stove had gone out; the kitchen was as dark as the rest of the house. Behind her, she heard breaking glass.

Then all at once the wind stopped. The night grew still and silent once more. Mary stopped crying and with a sigh leaned her head against Jane's shoulder. Very faintly, Jane heard the whistle of a train pulling into the town station. She rocked the baby once





not sure which of them she was comforting.

Somewhere far away, even farther than the train that had come for Jane's father, a bell chimed. The sound was faint, but very deep, much deeper than the bell she heard Sundays at church. It echoed down to Jane's bones, and just as the echoes faded the bell sounded again, and again. Mary began sobbing once more.

"Give me the child."

The voice echoed, too, a deep rumble that got into the space between Jane's ears and made her teeth rattle. She whirled around, but she couldn't see where in the dark the voice came from. She saw nothing but shadows, nothing at all. She swallowed, wishing the lights would come back on. Wishing her parents would both come home.

"The baby." The voice was quieter now, and more still, like the air after winter's first snow. Jane backed away, toward the unlit stove, meaning to find the poker, or maybe something else she could use as a weapon. She tried to shift Mary to one shoulder to free up a hand, but the baby wouldn't stop crying and squirming, and she didn't dare let go of her, not now.

"We will replace her." The speaker was suddenly much closer. Cool breath brushed the back of Jane's neck, but when she turned, nobody was there.

"No one need know." Now it spoke from near the curtained kitchen windows; Jane turned again to face the voice. "No one need know she is gone."

"Of course they'll know!" Jane's own voice came out high and trembling. In her arms, Mary started to scream. "I'll know! She's my sister!"

"You have our word. You will not be blamed."

"Go away," Jane said. She began shaking, and once she started she couldn't stop. "Leave us alone."

From behind Jane, in the chill shadows, a hand reached out and gripped her shoulder, its touch icy cold. Jane wrenched away, staggering forward. Mary wailed and twisted in her arms. Jane clutched her sister, as tightly as she'd ever clutched anything.

The hand touched Jane again, and this time the cold raced through her body, up her neck and down her back and along her arms and legs. For an endless moment she couldn't move, and even her thoughts were too numb to flow properly. She knew only the chiming bell and the sound of her sister's cries.

Then the chimes and the crying stopped — and everything else started up again. The lights flickered back on. Outside, crickets chirped at each other through the trees. Jane's thoughts unfroze too; she could move once more. Everything was all right. She hugged Mary tightly.

The baby didn't hug her back, didn't squirm in her arms, didn't move at all. Fear tingled at the base of Jane's skull; she looked down. The child she held looked exactly like Mary, from her downy brown hair to the spot where she'd scraped her chin last week. But she was limp as a rag doll, arms and legs flopping loose at her sides. She weighed almost nothing. She felt cold as ice.

"No!" Jane dropped the doll that wasn't her sister; it made no sound as it crashed to the floor. She raced down the hall, through the living room, out the door. From outside she could still hear the bell, though it was very low. "Give her back! Give her back!" Jane cried.

No answer. Nothing but stars and the cold, yellow glow of moonrise on the horizon.

Jane looked wildly about, then took a deep breath and ran in the direction of the chiming, skirting the muddy, harvested fields, ignoring the dirt that splattered onto her dress. She raced through a thicket of trees, tripping over roots and dying brown underbrush all the way, and staggered down to the edge of a trickling stream. There she stopped short. The bell had faded completely, and she didn't know which way to go next.

She collapsed to her knees by the water, burying her head in her hands. She wanted to cry again, but fear and running had burned her tears away. "I promised," she whispered. "I promised I would take care of her."

Wind rippled across the water. The Moon had fully risen now, and by its silver light Jane saw the current swirling by.

"A promise is not to be taken lightly." A deep, rich voice, from just beyond the water, one she'd heard once before that evening. Jane looked sharply up.

A man watched her from the far side of the stream, with skin ashen as tree bark, dark eyes set deep, dark hair as wild as dry leaves. His long gray cloak blew around his ankles, though the wind had stopped once more. He was much taller than Jane, taller even than her father. Beside him lay a blanketed bundle that might have been an infant. The bundle whimpered, a quiet, frightened sound far worse than Mary's screams. Jane caught her breath.

She scrambled to her feet and stood as straight as she could, wishing she were older, wishing she were taller. She stared at the man, very hard, wondering what she could possibly do or say or think that would make him give Mary back.

"The trouble," the man said, "is that I have promises to keep as well. Promises made long before I crossed the border into your world. If we're to strike a bargain at all, we must find a way to keep both our words."

Jane drew her arms tightly around herself. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice hoarse. "Why do you want my sister?"

The man laughed, and the sound scraped against the inside of Jane's skin. More than anything, she wanted to run from that sound; instead she dug her shoes into the muddy bank, and she waited.

"I don't want your sister at all," the man said. "I'm just a messenger. There are others who do the wanting."

Jane felt water seeping through her stockings. "Why do the others want her, then?"

"What they want is an heir. They'll settle for a servant, but they prefer a child of their own. And your sister is young enough."

The way he said "they" made Jane shiver. "Who are 'they'?"

"The dark ones, the folk under the hill — call them what you wish. It doesn't really matter. You're not likely to see them, after all."

"Why not?" Jane had to keep asking questions. So long as she kept the man talking, there was a chance he'd tell her how to get Mary back.

The man sighed, a sound like wind through dead leaves, only deeper, more unsettling. It made Jane dizzy. "They never take more than one from a family. It's one of their rules."

Like the army, Jane thought. The army had rules that said her father didn't have to fight because he was the only man in his family and needed to tend the farm. But while her father had waited for a while — long enough to see Mary born and for a few months more after that — eventually he'd decided to leave after all. He said Jane's mother and the hired hands knew enough to run the farm without him, if the War wasn't over in time for spring planting.

Jane's stomach twisted into a queasy knot, whether because of her father's leaving or the man now standing in front of her she didn't know. She shoved her hands deep into her pockets, the way her mother always told her not to. Her fingers brushed warm steel. The penny her father had given her for her letters, her thoughts.

He'd told her that he had to go to Europe — or the Pacific, he really wasn't sure which — because of a promise he'd made long ago, before Jane was even born, to protect his family and his country, though he'd been so young at the time he hadn't understood what the promise really meant.

Jane had made a promise, too, to take care of her sister. She hadn't known what her promise meant, either. She hadn't realized someone would actually come to take Mary away. But she'd promised just the same.

"Does it matter," she asked suddenly, "which one from the family you take?"

The man went silent. He didn't move for so long that Jane was certain she'd asked the wrong question, that she'd lost her sister after all. But then the man looked toward the bright stars, opening his mouth as if to voice some wordless question. He nodded, once, and looked back at Jane.

"All right," he said. "They'll do it."

"Do what?" Jane asked, though she thought she knew. Her stomach twisted tighter.

"Take you instead of the younger one, naturally." He stared down at her. "That is what you asked, isn't it? You're too old to be an heir, but you're healthy and your back seems strong. You'll make an excellent servant." He sighed once more, and Jane stepped nervously away from him. "Or didn't your promise mean anything after all? One way or the other, I need an answer. One of you must go."

Jane clutched the penny so hard her fingers hurt. "I'll do it." Her throat tightened; for a moment she wasn't sure she could speak. "I'll go with you. Just send Mary home."

The man nodded, moonlight flashing off his jagged white teeth. "I thought as much." He leaned across the stream and reached out his hand.

Jane took it, gripping the long, cold fingers with her short, warm ones. Far away, back at the house, so far she shouldn't have been able to hear, she could just make out the sound of a baby crying. The blanketed bundle by the man's side had disappeared; in its place Jane saw only overgrown weeds.

Mary was home then, and safe. Jane wondered whether her mother was home with her yet. The knot in her stomach turned hard and cold. She wondered what her mother would do when she found Jane was gone — or maybe found some limp rag doll in her place. She wondered how long a servant had to serve for. Even if her father returned from the War, would she ever see him again?

Still listening to her sister's cries behind and holding the stranger's hand ahead, Jane crossed the river, ignoring the water that sloshed over her shoes.

As soon as she reached the other side the chime started up again, not quite so faint as before.

Together they walked toward the sound, Jane and the ashen-faced man, upstream along the far bank, water flowing steadily to their left, trees rustling to their right. Neither spoke. Now that the decision had been made, there seemed nothing left to say.

Jane lost track of how long they traveled. Mud stained her clothes, made her feet squish in her shoes. Underbrush grew thick on the ground, thorns and vines cut through her stockings and scratched her legs. The trees grew more twisted and gnarled, with fewer and fewer leaves, like hands or maybe claws reaching toward the bank. The night turned colder and colder until Jane's breath came out in frosty puffs. Beside her, down a short rocky slope, the stream glittered with white light, almost as if frozen, water echoing hollowly as it rushed over rocks and roots.

The chime grew louder. The sound got under Jane's skin making her arms and legs tingle, until she could barely feel the long fingers that held her own. Her head began to throb, worse than when she'd caught the flu last winter.

The stream narrowed, and at last they came to a place where it ended, disappearing through a crack in a high stone wall, above which a thin band of cold, blue light shone, like dawn. Jane wondered how long she'd walked. Her feet ached, and the toe of one shoe was torn. That would have made her mother angry, were Jane home, since leather was yet another thing needed for the War. Yet after a night's walking, the War seemed strangely far away. So did her house, and her sister's cries.

The man released his grip on her hand — Jane had almost forgotten he still held it — and walked down to the wall. Jane scrambled after him. The chime was so loud now that her whole body shook with its echoes.

She expected the man to find a way around the wall, or maybe to climb over it, though she was so tired she had no idea how she'd follow if he did that. Instead he walked up and brushed the wall with his long, bony fingers. Then he grabbed Jane's arm and pressed her hand firmly against the stone.

The rock was hard and cold as ice, freezing skin and bone to its surface. Jane couldn't pull her hand away, even when the cold began to burn, fiercer than any fire. The cold spread through the rest of her body, holding her still as a statue in spite of the chiming bell. Before her lips clamped shut she managed to scream, but the sound turned brittle in the cold air and fell away.

And then the wall dissolved, though Jane's hand stayed frozen in

place, and she found herself staring into a deep cave, faintly lit by the same cold, blue light as the sky outside. All at once the bell fell silent. Against the far side of the cave Jane saw shadowy figures, much taller and darker than the man who had stood by her side a moment before. Her eyes were frozen with the rest of her, but still she strained to see him through the edges of her sight, only to find he was gone, as if he hadn't really walked with her all night.

One of the dark figures stretched out a hand. The hand grew longer as Jane watched, the way shadows do as the Sun dips toward the horizon. Dark fingers brushed her forehead, and as they did, the throbbing stopped — and Jane's thoughts became strange and blank as a sheet of ice. Her stomach churned, as if full of ice crystals. Without a thought or wish of her own she found herself walking forward, hand still stretched out in front of her, into the depths of the cave, even though she remained so solidly frozen that she wouldn't have thought she could move at all. Very far away, a thick, velvety voice said, "She will make an acceptable servant, that much is sure." There was laughter, and the sound was like nothing so much as a chiming bell.

Jane just kept moving, not hearing, not thinking at all, until she stood just a few feet away from the figures at the back of the cave, then closer still, close enough that she could have touched them, if she could have done anything at all. One of the figures, a different one than had first spoken, opened its shadowy arms, as if to draw her into a dark, cold hug.

Something stirred at the back of Jane's mind then, a thin, brittle memory amid the layers of cold, of someone else who had once reached out to hold her like that, long ago. Her numb, frozen hand dropped to her side, and by instinct more than thought, she reached into her pocket, where she touched something, something round and smooth and metallic.

Something that burned, red hot, against her cold skin.

Jane wrenched her hand from her pocket, but the thing stuck to her palm, burning like a live ember. Panic spread through her like wildfire, dissolving the ice, making her able to think once more, to feel the searing pain, to scream.

To remember where the coin in her pocket had come from, and what it meant.

Penny for your thoughts. She'd made more than one promise. To take care of her sister. To send her thoughts in her letters. To not forget.

A promise is not to be taken lightly, she thought through the fire. And she flung the coin at the cave wall, to burn the shadows away, to make them understand.

She heard a hiss, like hot coals on snow, and an awful cry, like shattering glass. There was a flash of cold, white light, so bright Jane covered her eyes. She heard a bell chime, but it cut off abruptly, leaving no echo behind. Slowly, Jane opened her eyes.

The shadows were gone. There was only warm Sunlight, shining through a hole in the ceiling she hadn't noticed before.

Sunlight, and her father's steel penny glowing on the floor below.

**T**HE PENNY DIDN'T BURN WHEN JANE PICKED IT UP again. She didn't let go of it, not all the long way home, even though she kept losing her balance, tripping over roots and rocks.

Outside the cave, the morning Sun shone brightly in her eyes, almost too bright after all the shadows. Even so early, the air felt much warmer than the day before. A bird chirped from a bare branch. Jane took a deep breath, inhaling a sweet, fresh smell nothing like the frost she'd felt all night. She ran along the stream, ran for her home, unable to believe she was free, that they hadn't taken her after all.

Eventually, late in the afternoon, she raced through the fields, which weren't quite as muddy as the night before, and up to her house. Her dress was torn nearly to rags, but she didn't care. More than anything she wanted to see that her sister really was all right, that her mother wasn't too upset from her being gone all night.

She expected to find her mother outside, looking for her, but the

*Continued on page 72*

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## STEEL PENNY

Continued from page 71

yard was empty, silent. Jane stopped running, suddenly uneasy. She stepped quietly into the house.

Her mother stood hunched over the kitchen stove, stirring something. For a long moment Jane stood behind her without speaking, feeling just a little bit strange and cold again, knowing something was wrong but not knowing what.

Then Mary crawled out from the hall and into the kitchen, looked up at Jane through large baby eyes, and let out a laughing gurgle. Jane laughed too, then, and swept Mary up into her arms, hugging her tightly, ignoring the drool that soaked through her dirty dress as the baby kept giggling. Mary was all right. Jane had saved her after all, had taken care of her just like she'd said she would.

Very slowly, Jane's mother turned around. Her eyes grew wide and strange, and in a hoarse strangled voice she whispered, "You came back. It's been so long. You came back." Her hands shook, and she looked like any moment she might start crying and never stop.

"Just one night—" Jane began, hating how tired, how unhappy her mother looked. But then she glanced out the window, and for the first time noticed something she hadn't seen while running the long way home.

The bare trees were covered with tiny green buds.

Jane thought of the fresh morning smell, of the warm air, of the birds she'd heard on the way back. She'd been gone much more than one night, gone all autumn and all winter too. It was spring. Somehow, in one night, she'd lost half a year.

But before she could think any more, the tiredness and unhappiness melted out of her mother's face, and she grabbed Jane and the baby both up into her arms, and suddenly all three of them were hugging and laughing and crying at once, and had there been any cold left in it would have dissolved for good then. If only her father were here as well, everything really would have been all night.

At the thought of her father Jane opened her hand to stare at the penny once more. Was it the steel that had burned the creatures in the cave and let her return home, or the promise behind it?

Could that promise somehow bring her father home as well, back across the ocean? Jane didn't know. All she knew was that the promise itself remained, and she had a whole autumn and winter's worth of thoughts to make up for.

She stayed downstairs with her mother and sister for a long time, telling them all that had happened. But later, when she was worn out with talking and laughing and crying, she went alone to her room, where she pulled out a sheet of her best writing paper.

And she wrote her father a letter. 40

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vided some interesting work, it's had an amazing effect on the physicists of your time. I can do very little directly in your world now save through those that are curious. But curiosity is the door through which we will return. I could have just given the text in English — but your curiosity made a link between you and me."

"Why do you do this? All the magic and games?"

"My masters exist in a realm of perfect freedom but must return to spawn in this place. I nurture the offspring who live among men showing them the way to darkness. The magic and the mystery attract them for it is closer to the way their true world lives. Then at times I break open vast holes and their parents come from them. All things that appeal to the imagination or to curiosity awaken what is not natural in man."

"So we're just a breeding ground."

"Meat for the maggots until they've become flies. But not you, Niles Pryor, you are one of us. You will translate the *Yellow Text* and when the stars are right you will lay bare this world."

I leaped up from my chair and turned on the light hoping that the light would drive it back. There was a scream from the mass of darkness that rested on my couch. It seemed to be a writhing collection of weirdly angled polygons, but at the same time it was a mass of boiling tar with a three-lobed eye of flame, and at the same time a mass of pulsating organs impaled on sharp fragments of obsidian bone and twisted into innumerable Mobius strips. It was all of these things and everything else. It was vileness and loathing and ecstasy. It writhed and pulsed, trying to get away from the light. It grew smaller and smaller until it slipped into a space it used to occupy.

TWO YEARS HAVE PASSED AND THEY HAVE not been good ones. Three times I sought to destroy the *Yellow Text*, yet failed each time. I couldn't make myself light the match, or turn on the shredder, or pour the acid.

I have finished my translation and every day I am more and more two minds. Part of me loves the world, loves Sally, loves the simple pleasure of bluebonnets blooming. Part of me longs for the dark world of Chaos where time and space are but two emotions as small in our scale as visible light to the electromagnetic spectrum.

Each day I waver between the two. I see men and women in the street. Sometimes I see a look, a movement, then I wonder if they are like me — spawn of the Elder Gods. The spells for summoning Yog-Sothoth and calling Chatanatha almost leave my lips.

I will not say the words.

I will say the words. ♪

(For Donald R. Burleson and Dave Mitchell)

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## KIN TO CROWS

*Continued from page 42*

him up, they kept him aloft with the beating of their wings. He breathed their dusty, gamy smell.

He wore crows.

IN A GRAY DAWN, EDWIN CHILDERS SAW A stranger peering into his empty new corn bin. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a man he didn't know on Bittersweet Creek.

When Edwin got closer, the man turned with an odd jerk. His face was covered with cuts and bruises, his nose and mouth were twisted. Edwin knew him, then, and some of the old anger came back.

The man said, "There's nothing in this new grain house." He smiled, then, and Edwin saw a tooth or two hid back in his mouth.

The smile dried up and its maker turned and hopped into the crib. The soot-colored coat he wore flapped in the wind that had sprung up, made it look like he'd fluttered in.

Edwin stomped to the crib and ducked in through the westward opening. He saw the Sun just coming up, just showing through the cracks between the pine planks of the far wall, where the ragged shape crouched, dark and wiry.

The voice was still strong, but had a rasp. "You can't give back what you took out of me, Edwin Childers," he said. "But here, here's your corn back."

A black shadow darted into the crib from behind Edwin, then out the east door. There was a tick and a rattle as it flew through.

The grain skittered along the floorboards until it rested against the side of Edwin's boot.

"That's some of the sweetest corn anybody could ever hope to glean, right there, Mr. Childers. Going to be a bumper crop, too."

Edwin's eyes were wide when he raised them from the corn to the broken face. "I don't want nothing of yours, boy," that deep voice cracked some, "I don't want no help from you."

The lips pursed as much as they could. "Ain't in me to give you anything, Mr. Childers. All that's in me now is taking away."

Then crows came from every direction. Flight, rattles, flutters, the farmer couldn't move for the tumult. The other walked around him, out the way they had come in.

The calling of birds and the rattling grew louder. Edwin couldn't move because his knees, his waist, were held by the weight of thousands of grains of corn. He roared and thrashed and lurched toward the opening, where corn spilled from the crib like gold.

A cloud of crows leaped from the grain-house. A man followed below them, his stride broken but his path straight. They went their way, gathering, gleaming, ♀



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## Elephants, cavalry, chariots, and infantry bring a new look to the oldest strategy game.

A DESIRE TO PLAY SEEMS TO BE COMMON AMONG MANY ANIMALS. SURE, WE CAN PUT off most games as training of some kind. Wrestling wolf cubs are training for the day when they will be forced to duel for the dominance of the pack. Young lions play at hunting as they refine the skills that will one day mean life for their own prides and death for their prey. Chimps and gorillas have complex play activities that help them learn their way through an equally complex social structure. There's definitely a purpose behind the play. Even so, it's hard to watch young animals without thinking that they draw great pleasure

from their boisterous activity. These kids are not slavishly striving to hone their abilities, they're just having fun.

Humans are no exception to this pressure to rule. In fact, no species comes close to the time, energy, and variety with which humans engage in "play" activities. Today many of those activities are organized into sporting events. The best of these are tests of strength, endurance, and precision — all things that are necessary to the survival of a predatory species that's singularly unequipped with fangs and claws.

But when did ancient humans begin to engage in another form of play — a play that had nothing to do with the exercise of muscles and physical skills? When did we develop play meant to exercise only the mind? The Egyptian culture certainly had games of mental skill going back to at least 2000 BC. Many games, including several still in use today, such as Dominoes, originated at about the same time in ancient China.

Somewhere around 500 AD, players in India took up a variant of one of these Chinese games and adapted it. They revised the rules, refined the units, and balanced

the play to produce something called "Chaturanga." This game, played on an 8-by-8 board, pitted two armies against each other in what was to become the prototype for thousands of strategy games to follow. With units based on the divisions of the armies of the day — elephants, chariots, archers, and infantry — Chaturanga was the direct ancestor of modern chess.

By the later part of the 15th century, the modern game of chess emerged from Spain. From the beginning, chess fueled a dedicated following. Books were published on chess openings and strategies. Kings and potentates faced each other across boards of polished wood and skillfully carved stone. A notation was developed to record the play of important games and books of chess problems were fashioned to test the skills of players. The most highly regarded players, such as Roy Lopez, recorded their thoughts on the game in works that are still studied to this day. Unfortunately, I'm a bad chess player. I have hopes that this may be changed, however. Armed with the latest technology and with the skills of uncounted chess experts now residing on my computer, I have hopes that I can elevate my negligible chess ability into a weapon that might actually challenge a creature with a backbone. To this end, I have assembled the following artillery:

**USCF Chess, Interplay**  
[www.interplay.com](http://www.interplay.com)

The USCF in the title of this program stands for "United States Chess Federation." This software marks the first time that this august chess organization has sanctioned a piece of computer software. Interplay owns BrainStorm, and they're the producers of the *Battle Chess* series from a few years back, so it might be expected that this is a wiz-bang animation show. But it's less, and more, than might be expected.

USCF is serious chess presented in a serious manner. There's a tutorial here, and there are lessons, but they are completely shorn of frivolity. That's not to say that the program is lacking in niceties. There are several very clearly rendered 3-D chessboards, and clean layouts. Just don't expect the bishop to smack anyone on the head with his mitre. Since *USCF Chess* is sanctioned and its own engine officially rated, you can use it to obtain USCF ratings that are supposedly official for tournament play.

*Even in the ancient and honorable game of chess sometimes you have to let him win... Painting by Doug Beckman.*



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I tried this, taking the default rating of 1400, and found myself plummeting downward through the ranks — which is probably a good sign that the game plays at the advertised strength.

USCF Chess is not the flashiest program on the market, and it doesn't offer the biggest array of options. What the program does deliver is a solid game of chess and the authority of the USCF Interplay is now making this program available as part of a bundle with *Chess Mates*. Together, you may find that this package provides both coddling and fun for the beginner, and more serious fare for the student who has progressed beyond the need for green dragons.

*Chessmaster 5500*, Headland Digital Media  
[www.chessmaster.com](http://www.chessmaster.com)

This is the grandpappy of the programs in this review. The latest version, *Chessmaster 5500*, shows both the depth of that long ancestry and the strength of the maker's chess obsession in the rich set of options and abilities.

Like most of the programs in this review, *Chessmaster* plays a strong game of chess, strong enough to beat all but a handful of master-level humans in the world. But that's not where its real strength lies. *Chessmaster* shines in its tutorial, in the range of options presented, and in its uncanny ability to analyze a previously played game.

*Chessmaster* provides tips from chess master Josh Waitzkin, best known as the subject of the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. These are mainly a canned selection of information, but if you've never had a chance to see a master player at work, they provide a great insight into the depth of thought involved in top-level play.

When it comes to opponents, *Chessmaster* provides options for days. Want a player who is timid at the opening, plays a solid middle game, falls for traps, and is ferocious in the end game? You can create such a player here. And you can play this opponent on a wide variety of boards from a number of angles.

The most impressive feature of this new version has to be the interactive analysis. This feature can take a recorded game and play it back move after move, making comments on each move. These comments have an extraordinary range. You'll hear details on how each move affected position, how moves set up events still some turns away, and when mistakes sent the player down the inevitable road to destruction. Not only have I learned something from listening to these reviews, after talking to more polished players I'm convinced that this is the best thing next to a human chess coach.

*Combat Chess*, Empire Interactive  
[www.empire-us.com](http://www.empire-us.com)

Anyone who has been fiddling around with computer chess for more than a few weeks is bound to have run into Interplay's



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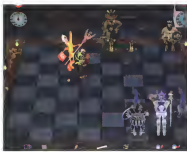
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**Battle Chess.** Battle Chess sought to add some life to the traditional game by giving each piece a personality expressed through animation and sounds. Conflict between pieces became not just a clean removal of an abstract chunk of wood, but a sometimes clever, sometimes-grotesque contest. To a large extent, *Battle Chess* was successful. It was certainly popular enough to be translated to every platform under the Sun.

*Combat Chess* is the spiritual successor to *Battle Chess*. In fact, there's no doubt that Empire Interactive set out to take the *Battle Chess* concept and do it one better, and for the most part, succeeded. Where *Battle Chess* had only a limited set of animations, one for each pair of combatants, *Combat Chess* has dozens, if not hundreds. In addition, the board and background have gotten into the act, as lightning flashes and drums pound a quickening pace as chess clocks tick down. There's also a theme to *Combat Chess* animations. White pieces are painted as the forces of good and their animations are often upbeat and chivalrous. The black pieces show cunning and treachery.

As a chess engine, *Combat Chess* may not be as strong as others, but it is powerful enough to mangle all but the best human players. Still, you may find that this is not the best program for improving your game. The animations themselves are often so entertaining that I found myself engineering match-ups between pieces rather than worrying about overall play. Hmm, just what will happen if a bishop takes out the queen? How will that white rook put down a black knight? It's all entertaining, but I can't say it isn't distracting.

**Power Chess, Sierra On-Line**  
[www.sierra.com](http://www.sierra.com)

*Power Chess* is a new title that bases its play around a program called *Wchess*. *Wchess* is famous in computer chess circles for being one of the strongest programs ever developed for standard hardware. This program offers two main opponents, the Power King and the Power Queen. The Power Queen represents the unblinded power of the core engine, making it a merciless foe. On the other hand, the Power King does slip up now and then, making the same kinds of mistakes that human players often make under pressure. The Power King adjusts its play depending on the level of skill demon-

strated by the opponent. He attempts to put his play at a rank above — but only slightly above — your current level of play. This makes the king a challenging, but not overwhelming, opponent and leads to one close game after another — and exciting play. If rising to the challenge of the king sounds like too much work, you can also drop back to play against the prince. The prince plays just a little worse than your current rating, so if you stay on your toes you can best him on most occasions.

In addition to the royal family, there are a variety of commoners that you can play against, each with its own styles, strengths, and weaknesses. Many of these characters are designed to match the playing style of chess notables, others are simple demonstrations of style. Should none of them strike



your fancy, you can also design characters of your own, choosing from a moderate range of options to set their strength.

One other feature of *Power Chess* stands out. The Power Queen can provide analysis of a game in play, or a game that has been saved. This analysis is delivered aloud in clear, crisp English. This feature, which is also a part of *Chessmaster 5500*, turns dry review into an entertaining session. And even I found myself learning something about chess as I played back my losing efforts. After a few sessions with the queen you may find however, that while her voice is smooth her analysis is, well, mechanical. This is one feature where *Power Chess* is ahead of most of the pack, but just not up to the level of the old master. I'll definitely be looking forward to seeing what the next version brings.

After a couple of weeks watching my pawns fall into disarray and my major pieces sucked into trap after trap, I do feel I'm becoming a bit better. Not enough better to face the opposition of an alert eight year old, but I'm getting there. Based on my world record abilities as a chess loser, I can say that these programs do offer some exercise to that flabby gray muscle between your ears. Fifteen-hundred years from its origin, the limits of this land have not been reached. I invite you to join me there and destroy my army with the strength of nothing but your will. No dice. No random chance. Just brain power.

I'm almost certain you'll have no trouble mopping the floor with this aging beginner, and I'm equally certain that I'll enjoy every minute. ♠



# PROTOCOLS

Continued from page 60

guish any human features.

(Am I calm enough, Dr. Koate?)

I don't know how long I stood there. The cliché turns out to be painfully accurate: It might have been centuries; was probably seconds.

I moved at last when the standing figure shifted its attention from the prostrate one to me. Eyes moved under that coat of ants, that armor of silverfish, beetles, flies, wasps. Eyes that might have been two more insects: shiny and cool and inscrutable.

The figure on the ground gagged and screamed, and I ran for the house.

THIS DIFFERS FROM WHAT YOU MAY HAVE seen on the local news.

I told the news people and the police I'd found an insect-covered body under the willow while looking for my daughter, and I was honest about what I did next. I ran up the hill, arrived panting and incoherent at Corinna's back door, told her to phone 911; then I hooked up the garden hose, the 60-footer that reached both front and back yards, tossed the coil over the cedar fence and unwound it downslope. Turned the garden faucet counterclockwise as far as it would go and hurried back down to the willow.

Under the willow I found not two figures now but one, just one, the one that had been writhing on the ground; but it was still, and the insects were twining back into the mulch even before I turned the water on them.

I washed the body clean.

I couldn't make out the face in the fading light until I leaned close enough to scoop a mass of wriggling larvae from the open mouth.

Then I recognized him.

Mikey Winston. He was still alive, though barely.

There was not much left of his clothing or, in places, his skin. His body was grotesquely swollen. His eyes were gone, and I don't know how he recognized me, maybe by my smell. He grasped my sleeve, turned to vomit more insects from his throat; then he said, in a nearly soundless wheeze, "Thank you."

I told Mikey to lie still, that help was coming. Not that I imagined he had more than minutes to live.

"They loved me," he said.

"Don't talk, Mikey."

"They used to. And I protected them. No pesticides on the lawns. Not on my lawns." He took my hand. I felt the abraded tissue of his palm, the bony clench of his fingers.

"But the meds don't work right. I smell bad to them now. They wanted a new king." He turned his eyeless face toward me. "A new queen."

I stayed with him until the paramedics arrived, but he was beyond help. The medics

made a half-hearted attempt at resuscitation, but even they seemed repulsed by what Mikey had become.

He died, they tell me, of shock, both physical and anaphylactic. If his wounds hadn't killed him, the multiple venoms and poisons in his bloodstream surely would have.

"At least," one cop told me later, "we can be sure it wasn't murder."

"Regicide," I said.

"Regicide? What's that, some brand of bug spray?"

"Just thinking out loud," I said. "Never mind."

EMILY, CORINNA SAID, HAD BEEN IN HER room all along.

But she came downstairs during all the commotion.

Came down barefoot.

Later that evening, I retrieved her missing shoe and returned it to her. She looked at it, and then at me, and I don't care to recall the depths of hatred and suspicion in her eyes.

Turnabout is fair play, right, Dr. Koate? Once my daughter was afraid of me.

Now I'm frightened of my daughter.

She took the shoe sullenly and turned to carry it up to her room. In the space where she had been standing, a dozen glossy black ants scurried away.

MAYBE IT WAS A MISTAKE TO TELL DR. Koate the story. Plainly she didn't believe me, though she was relentlessly sympathetic, reserved, calm. Deep as the Earth, that calm, and weighty as all the insects in the world.

Dr. Koate prescribed Thallin to go with the Lithotabs. Ostensibly to suppress what she views as my alarming slide into paranoia, but there is, I think, a subtext: an invitation to join in the invisible protocols of the planet, take my place in the new and shifting global chemical discourse.

I have the bottle now. I have it in my hand. A small brown innocuous pharmacy bottle with my name and dosage and doctor printed on the label. Open the lid, and I can see 60 daily doses of Thallin: small crosshatched pills the same shade of purple as those Flintstone vitamins we used to give Emily.

The ants are worse since Mikey died. They come up between the floorboards. Mr. Saffka has stopped putting down roach powder, for reasons he won't divulge. The roaches are getting worse, too.

But it's the ants that circle around me like an anxious audience.

They want me to take the pills.

Corinna, is there really a secret language? Em, have you learned to speak it?

Do I belong here?

If I take the pills, will I be able to hear my daughter's voice?

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## MOMENTS

Continued from page 53

shouldn't I ask?"

"I'm not telepathic," she said. "You're his buddy. You probably know better than I do."

"Buddy," he muttered under his breath, and looked uncomfortable.

"Colleague, then," she said. "Although 'colleague' seems a little inadequate, under the circumstances, doesn't it? So I gather you never married, Mr. Bennet?"

"More coffee?" he said, rather desperately.

"Tea would be lovely."

They fussed over cups and sugar in the guarded forced intimacy of two people who made each other nervous, then returned to the conference table.

"Maybe we can talk about external factors for a moment," he said. "Tell me what you eat. Any special dietary requirements? Is your talent noticeably affected by any particular foods?"

"Well, I do eat a lot of chocolate," she said.

"But I'm not supposed to have any."

Abruptly he reached forward and turned off the tape recorder.

"You're thinking that Hurley won't like it," she said. "But you want to talk about things you don't want him to hear. You're sorry for me, and tired of treating me like a test particle. Thank you."

He looked away. "And you're not telepathic?"

"No. It's quiet. Hurley spoke so rarely he didn't really give me any gaps to listen to. And after he wised up, Stiles became very good at covering up silences. He talked through pauses. He's a very sharp fellow, but arrogant. I'm not sure what you see in him. You, I like."

"You shouldn't have come here," he said. "We'll want to find out everything. We'll dissect your whole life and test the rest of it away, trying to learn what makes you . . . you. We'll start softly, but by the end, who knows what you'll have left?"

"What will you make me do?" she said with some interest.

"Well, to start with you'll be our little biology experiment," he said. "We'll take samples of everything you have and run you through every piece of apparatus known to man. After that, we have a library of tapes of covert operations, and things of that sort. Events that could use some clarification, and . . . By the way, have you ever watched the old TV footage of the Kennedy assassination?"

"Yes. Too noisy."

"Ah. But there are other tapes, other cases. And places we could put you, and let you listen to the silence."

"But Hurley isn't impressed with me."

"He thinks this sense of yours isn't specific enough to be truly useful. The couple was Japanese, not Hispanic, for example. You may not be accurate enough. But perhaps the

next version of you will be."

"Next?"

"If there's any logic at all to this talent of yours, we'll find it, isolate it, refine it, and give it to somebody else."

"Whatever it is," she said.

"Angela, once you're in the system, you never get out."

She reached over to comfort him. "Come on now, Mr. Bennet. Don't look so upset. It doesn't matter. At my age, there's always a way out of the system. Let's go and see the sunshine, shall we?"

A PARK, WITH TREES AND GRASS AND KITES. They walked very slowly, and sat at the first bench.

"I wanted three things when I came to you," said Angela. "I wanted to know if there's ever been anyone else like me, and I found out that there hasn't. Hurley is high-up enough, he'd have known."

"And the other things?"

"I wanted to tell it all to someone who might understand, who could tell me I'm not just a crazy old woman."

"You're not a crazy old woman," he said quietly.

"And I wanted to warn you," she said. "Maybe there are others like me, who aren't Americans. I wanted the government to know that. D'you follow?"

"You've done all that."

They fell silent and regarded each other thoughtfully.

"Ah," she said. "Now I see what you want."

"Well, what's the answer?" he said.

"What's the real question?" she replied.

He kicked at a stone and looked away, and she wondered: When had men in their forties started to look so young?

"I want to know how the story really ends," he said.

DEATHBED, HIS; PIPES AND TUBES LEADING into Christopher's arms, neck, and sunken chest from metal racks complex enough to house submarine defense systems. She in black, anticipating the moment when she'd throw the switch and power down the arrays and bring his pain to a close.

"I'm very calm," he said. "Peaceful. For the first time in my life there's nothing left to worry about. I suppose that's it. Angie, Angela, oh, I wish we hadn't wasted all those years."

She was calm too. It was as if her own life would end when she terminated his. "Wasted?" she said.

"So much time spent apart, when we could have been together."

"But," she said, "for me, those were almost the best times. Without that, what would it all have meant?"

The skin on his lips cracked as he smiled. She wiped them with a handkerchief. "Angie, always so philosophical. All right, then. I wish we hadn't fought so much. Said

some of those... things."

"After you left, each time, I knew they weren't true."

They listened to the quietness that wreathed them, oblivious to the hums and gurgles of the life-support racks. She knew when next the pain came, although his eyes never clouded.

"There are still some things I never told you," Christopher said eventually, after the machinery had reacted to the threat with copious supplies of silent chemical agents. "But I'm not sure it matters any more. Always, the less I tried to explain, the more you seemed to understand."

"It's true," she said. "And those things don't matter. We, you and me, that's what was important. Christopher, I love you. I'm going to do it now."

"Yes," he said. "I love you, Angela-girl." "I began to love you before we even dated," she said. "Do you remember? You called me and left a message on the machine. It was a Tuesday. I always wanted to ask how you truly felt that day, when you left the message, just before you hung up. I wanted to hear it from your own lips. Do you remember what you were thinking?"

"No, I think I was already half in love, but... Is it important?"

"No, my darling," she said. "Rest now. I love you."

"I love you, Angela." She knew he wanted to die with her name on his lips. She flipped back the plastic cover and pressed the switch to make the machines stop.

And drank in the silence of his passing.

#### THE SILENCE.

Bennet cleared his throat, which seemed to have an onion lodged in it. He was very close now. He wanted to be in the office with the tape running, to get this and keep it, but his ears and memory would have to suffice.

Carefully, he said: "And what did you hear?"

"Nothing," said she.

"But, at the moment of death —"

"Nothing," she said firmly, and he knew he would get no more out of her.

#### BENNET WALKED HOME, THINKING.

Christopher, dead. Angela, reader of silences, duty done, life closing, happy, affirmed, not afraid of death, and no traitor to his whispered secrets. A life lived in the gaps. Maybe he would talk to Stiles, call Hurley, pretend it was all a scam, at the very least get the agency to lay off her for a week or two.

A purple night. Wind in the trees. He hoped Christopher was waiting somewhere behind the silence. Soon Angie would read her own silences.

He lost himself for a while, and walked right past his own house. Coming to, he discovered he was looking at his feet as he strolled. Avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk.

And listening, listening. *ie*



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## FOREVER

Continued from page 49

toward the pit of silence and dissolving.

Halting, Zulmeh thought he was, after all, the forever-bringing man from the desert, who must be a mage, and so quite capable of constant change.

"I will give you all I have," said Zulmeh, no longer running at his back but standing deadly still, "if you will take your curse from me."

"Did I curse you?"

"Yes. With your venomous blessing."

"I only gave you, Diamond," he said, "what you wanted."

"No one," said the Diamond, "ever gave me that."

Then he laughs, and turns and faces her. She cannot see at all who he is, for he is all shapes, all colors, coming and going, chaotic, elastic—terrible. Yet, his voice is like a song.

"My father," said the Diamond, "gave me a gem in place of my mother. The animal I loved they brought me made into wood, with cold hard fur, and eyes of vitreous. They gave me the heads of men in a pond of blood. They gave me the heavy crown of Jeshlah. Only one thing I never did ask for, and that was my marriage to my husband. And this was the only thing I ever wanted. Yet I did not know I wished for it till he was by my side."

"Hazz is gone," said the whirlwind upon the sand.

"Hazz is dead. I wish for death."

"You asked for never-ending life. Wished for and wanted it."

The Diamond said, "Did I not tell you. It has always been my way to ask for and receive that which I do not want?"

"You are a fool," said the thing before her.

"Go back to Jeshlah."

"Jeshlah has fallen," said Zulmeh, "I have lived on, and centuries have passed. I have felt every one of them drag over me as it went. It has been centuries."

"Fool," said the thing which had given her forever, "it has only been 30 days. The number of the years of your little human life."

Zulmeh opened wide her eyes. "Then have you not—" said she, "made me an immortal?"

"I gave you forever in 30 days. I did not promise you your wish, but its remedy."

Zulmeh opens wide her eyes once more, and this time wakes. The night is spread above, black and still, the stars fixed in their places, each sparkling hard and enduring as any diamond.

THEY SAY, IT IS TRUE, THAT ZULMEH returned to her city, over the desert. She was very strong and not old. But the rumor of her journey, and her brief (it had been brief) sojourn in the waste, became a legend of that land.

When she came near the city, peasants at a well saw her walking toward them, and knew her as the Queen. They brought her

milk in a clay cup, and she clasped their hands, those of young and old alike, laughing like a girl, so they laughed too. She petted the goats of their wild herds as if goats were quite new to her. The herdsmen said, never was there a king like this.

But for Zulmeh, what? The frantic race of time, which she had only imagined, or been spelled to see, or spelled herself to see, had ceased. What she had witnessed in her sensation of eternity, the line beside the mouth, the fallen stone, were those intimations that all men, and all women too, will notice now and then. But not as she had done.

For had she ever noted a gray hair in the black harp-ropes of Hazz? No, never. But they were there, since he had been many years older than she. Had she thought the Sun ran across Heaven? Never, until she was given forever. (The remedy.)

Nothing is forever, unless, like the demon creature in her dream, it changes. Youth to age. Age to death. Death to birth to youth—

Re-entering the gate of her city, it stood high as Heaven, and full of its blue petals, the lions proud, their paws and peerless heads only a little worn. While on the avenue her soldiers raised their spears in salute, young men, mature men, strong and valid. And beyond, the people called for her, and the children timelessly played, and roses fell, firm and fragrant, the color of a sunset that was not blood, nor decay, but like a young girl's blush.

And in the city, the towers and the walls, they soared up. And in her private rooms, her lovely maidens welcomed her, peaches, jasmín, with teeth like pearls.

Zulmeh had seen what immortality might entail. Now she saw again what mortals see, dancing together on the floor of life, whose tiles are whole and perfect. Yet never would she forget her vision, her 30 days in a wilderness, static, and about her the whole wheel of time revolving and revolving. Poor child, she saw what men should never see. Wise child, she learned, and left it and came away, and lived. Hard lesson. Last lesson, perhaps.

In Jeshlah, Zulmeh the Diamond raised a pylon, which at midday held the Sun upon its tip. She would watch this phenomenon through a lens, a third jade eye. It always took the proper time. By night she traced the measured progress of the planets.

Also, in her 31st year, she married again a prince of another land. He was not black, but the color of honey. She bore for him, and for herself, three children, who ruled the city when Zulmeh's mortal time was done.

Long, long before that hour had struck, one night, near dawn, there was a shooting star. It flashed like a jewel across the firmament.

Zulmeh's lower-husband kissed her, and he said, "If you wanted it, I would give you that brilliant thing—if I could. I cannot. But I will love you forever."

The Diamond said, as the sages record, "We love. But nothing is forever, as forever is nothing. Forever is this moment. The world in a grain of sand." ■

## FOLKROOTS

Continued from page 33

ton Irving (the author of *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*) paid a visit to the Scottish writer and folklorist Sir Walter Scott. The following comes from Irving's account of that meeting, published in 1835: "The evening passed delightfully in a quaint-looking apartment, half-study, half-drawing room. Scott read several passages from the old romance of Arthur, with a fine deep sonorous voice, and a gravity of tone that seemed to me to suit the antiquated, black-letter volume. It was a treat to hear such a work, read by such a person, and in such a place; and his appearance as he sat reading, in a large armed chair, with his favorite hound Maida at his feet, and surrounded by books and relics, and border trophies, would have formed an admirable and most characteristic picture. While Scott was reading, the sage grimalkin [Scott's cat] had taken his seat in a chair by the fire, and remained with fixed eye and grave demeanor, as if listening to the reader. I observed to Scott that his cat seemed to have a black-letter taste in literature.

"Ah," said he, "these cats are very mysterious kind of folk. There is always more passing in their minds than we are aware of. It comes no doubt from their being so familiar with witches and warlocks." He went on to tell a little story about a gude man who was returning to his cottage one night, when, in a lonely out-of-the-way place, he met with a funeral coffin covered with a black velvet pall. The worthy man, astonished and half frightened at so strange a pageant, hastened home and told what he had seen to his wife and children. Scarce had he finished, when a great black cat that sat by the fire raised himself up, exclaimed, "Then I am king of the cats!" and vanished up the chimney. The funeral seen by the gude man was one of the cat dynasty.

"Our grimalkin here," added Scott, "sometimes reminds me of the story, by the airs of sovereignty which he assumes; and I am apt to treat him with respect from the idea he may be a great prince incognito, and may some time or other come to the throne."

As a writer who also lives with cats (three clever fiends in my desert house and one dainty puss in the English cottage), I confess I share Scott's attitude, and the attitude of the ancient Egyptians—I'm inclined to treat cats with the care and courtesy usually due to royalty (much to the amusement, I might add, of non-cat-owning friends).

Three pairs of eyes are watching me now, from the bookshelf, the couch, the ledge by the window. Faerie land shines in those eyes. And now I must go, for a full Moon is rising....

(With thanks to Ellen Steiber for the loan of her cat books, and to Oliver, Apollo, Arizona and Nora for inspiration. Copies of previous Folkroots columns can be found on the Web at: <http://www.endicott-studio.com/>.)

## BOOKS

Continued from page 18

young man, Smith, who has received an incredible gift, a magical star that allows him to enter the land of faery. Smith's journeys there are filled with mystery and wonder: "Some of his briefer visits he spent looking only at one tree or one flower." And while faery is a place of great beauty, it is no "My Pretty Pony" pink sugar-candy land. Faery also contains terrors, sights that simply overwhelm and strike awe into the heart: "The eleven mariners were tall and terrible; their swords shone and their spears glinted and a piercing light was in their eyes. Suddenly they lifted up their voices in a song of triumph, and his heart was shaken with fear, and he fell upon his face."

The access to faery enriches Smith, though, imbuing his creations as a smith with beauty and grace. While most of the citizens of Wootton Major have ceased to believe in faery, they appreciate Smith's creations, and the town is better for having Smith in it. In showing what faery does for Smith, Tolkien reveals what fantasy can do for all of us. Fantasy, or faery, is not some irrelevant source for a quick shot of escapism and entertainment; it is the wellspring of imagination, a light revealing profound truths, our touchstone of a greater reality.

On a lighter note, *Farmer Giles of Ham* is a great romp, a story of cowardly heroes, cowardly villains, knights obsessed with fashion, and a mare whose laziness saves the day. Farmer Giles wants nothing more than to do the least amount of work and kick his mischievous dog when he deserves it. When a near-sighted giant stumbles into his fields, though, Giles is forced to protect his possessions. He hopes to scare the giant off with a blunderbuss he hasn't fired in years, but when he sees the giant, Giles is so terrified that he fires the gun by accident. The giant, not only near-sighted but deaf, thinks he's been stung by a dragonfly and decides to head home. The people of Ham proclaim Giles a giant-killing hero. And so his troubles begin.

When a dragon begins to decimate the countryside, the townspeople call on Giles to save them. Giles is as reluctant to fight the dragon as the dragon is to fight Giles. This is not a story of princes and princesses. It is a down-to-earth story of a common man, a man who finds it much more sensible to think than to fight, whose No. 1 concern is always the safety of No. 1, and whose No. 2 concern generally involves money. In short, he's someone like us. And yet in Giles exists something heroic, a glimmer of greatness. And in that lies the book's final reward: One can't help thinking, if Giles can be a hero, then so can I.

Tolkien provides some very special joys in this thin volume. I hope you'll give an old book a try.

—Jennie Caveles

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## Contributors

**R**OBERT CHARLES WILSON WAS born in California but has lived most of his life in Canada. He has resided in Vancouver, B.C. and currently lives in Toronto, Ontario. His first novel, *A Hidden Place*, was published in 1986. *Mysterium*, his sixth novel, won the Philip K. Dick Award in 1995. His novelette, *The Persids*, published in *Realms of Fantasy*, won the Aurora Award for best Canadian short sf and was a finalist for the Nebula Award. His next book, *Darwinia*, is due from Tor in 1998. He is tolerated by his large family and in his spare time he likes to repair and rebuild vacuum-tube electronics. An avid sf and fantasy reader for years, he still thinks writing fiction is a Cool Thing To Do. Contrary to rumor, he is occasionally seen by daylight.

Christopher Rowe lives and works in Kentucky, and Kentucky is what he writes about, mainly. He is married to an artist (a closet Kansan) and they're looking forward to the great wealth and fame that story writing and picture painting will no doubt bring them. They have a couple of dogs and a bunch of cats. Christopher's mama says he's ornery, but she's got a lot of Blair in her and you know how those people are.

Alan Smale has lived in two countries and survived two physics degrees, sings bass with two rocking a cappella groups, and has achieved two Honorable Mentions in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* anthologies and a Second Place finish in *The Writers of the Future* contest. An expatriate Yorkshireman, Alan currently lives in exotic Maryland and works for NASA as an X-Ray astronomer. His fiction has appeared in several pro and small press markets including *A Wizard's Dozen* and *A Nightmare's Dozen* (Harcourt Brace), *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Writers of the Future* #13, *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*, and *Night Terrors*. He is currently marketing a Young Adult fantasy novel entitled *The Missing*, while trying to find some quiet gaps in a busy life to write another. This is his first appearance in ROF.

Don Webb is a member of *The American Academy of Poets*. He has published stories in *Blood Muse*, *Wheel of Fortune*, *In Dreams*, *Black*



Christopher Rowe



Alan Smale

*Raven*, *White Swan*, *War of the Worlds*, *Tarot Fantasies*, *A Pawn of Chaos*, *Forbidden Acts*, *The Starry Wisdom*, *High Fantastic*, and several other anthologies.

Tanith Lee says of *I Bring You Forever*: A newly written story in/on Flat Earth (*Night's Master*, etc.). I have always known there was meant to be a sixth book (thereby making the erotic series, appropriately, a sextet). This, though a short story, would definitely be in the novel.

Peni R. Griffin is an Air Force brat. Her childhood was spent reading and taking long car trips as they moved from Texas to Alaska, Alaska to Iowa (while her father was in 'Nam), Iowa to Maryland, and Maryland back to Texas. Peni came to San Antonio to attend two universities, graduating from neither. In 1987 she married Michael D. Griffin, A.K.A. Damon. They live in a ninety-year old house near downtown San Antonio with their housemate, Michael Christy and three cats. Griffin's secret identity is as a word processor for an appraisal firm. At lunch she sits at the river watching for herons, snowy egrets and interesting fauna. Her ninth book, *Margo's House*, was released in October of 1997. Her best known books are *Switching Well*, and the Edgar-nominated mystery *The Treasure Bird*. Projects currently making the round of publishers include a ghost story, a time-travel story involving mammoth hunters on the Edwards Plateau, a YA lesbian novella, and a novel-length fairy tale.

Carol Heyer is represented by *Worlds of Wonder* for her science fiction and fantasy work. Her art can also be found at *Every Picture Tells a Story*, the gallery in Beverly Hills that exclusively sells art from children's books. Carol's illustration entitled *Faerie Fire*, recently won the *Spectrum* competition for fantasy and science fiction as well as *The Society of Illustrators' Annual*. She is currently at work on two children's books, a project for Harper Collins, and a cover for TSR *Collector Cards for Ice*.

Janet Aulisio is hard at work on a personal series of paintings, in addition to her commissioned work for most of the SF field's major magazines.



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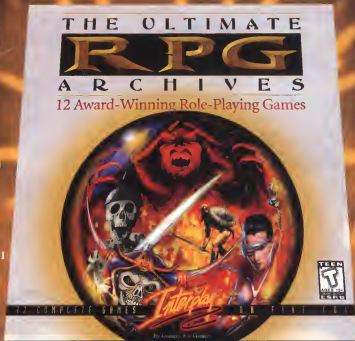
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